NARRATING AND NEGOTIATING BUTCH AND FEMME: STORYING LESBIAN SELVES IN A HETERONORMATIVE WORLD

By

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by

Sara L. Crawley

This dissertation is dedicated to Dianne, Lisa, Jen, Aneeza, and, especially, Barbara, and all the women–mentors, lovers and friends–who have changed my life so measurably and so much for the better.

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August 2002

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This dissertation concerns how lesbians narrate butch and femme as parts of self and as means to participate in communities and disrupt institutions. It begins with the assumption that butch and femme are narrative resources for storying selves. Drawing from a constructionist perspective, the project is concerned less with what butch and femme *are*, than with *how they are used* to make sense of lesbian lives. Hence, butch and femme are understood as useful ideas emergent from the local experiences of women with non-normative sexual interests living in a heterosexist, deeply gendered everyday world. The project is based on focus groups and couples and individual interviews with lesbians in and around a suburban, university town. It is argued that the notions of butch and femme tell us as much about the world in which we all live as about the individual lesbians themselves. Butch and femme are produced through the process of making sense of nonconformity in a heteronormative world. This is an interactional and interpretive

process narrated as reality. Butch and femme derive from the limited and limiting discourses available for storying women's sexuality coherently, yet they are actively produced as resistant to those discourses and specific to lesbians. The results of my project suggest three important findings. First, often the coherences to which others hold us accountable are at least as salient in the production of self and personhood as are our own ideas of ourselves. Second, the heteronormative paradigm remains the only coherence system for understanding sexuality and gender. Third, the voices of individuals in their everyday lives illuminate the advancements of feminist politics and an understanding of the meaning of time. Ultimately, this project is a testament to the importance of narrating self as a means for individuals to actively participate in the production of making sense of the world.

CHAPTER 1
"YOU KNOW WHEN YOU SEE IT, BUT YOU CAN'T SAY EXACTLY WHAT IT IS": ENTERING THE DEBATES ABOUT BUTCH AND FEMME: A LITERATURE REVIEW[1]

A popular T-shirt in the 1990s read simply "Butch on the Streets, Femme in the Sheets." As a product of popular culture in these supposed post-feminist, postmodern times, this slogan implies many pertinent concerns for the development of lesbian selves. First, it claims an out, in-your-face, public persona for lesbians in this heterosexist culture. Second, it continues to foreground sexuality as a significant factor in lesbian identity. Third, it refers to lesbian history by continuing to value butch and femme[2] as lesbian-specific phenomena. And, in my estimation, most curiously, it suggests a revision to that history that allows for new means of lesbian selves. While butch and femme used to mean very specific public and private personas, now "butch" and "femme" can be modified to describe a host of self-definitions that need not be consistent or definitive or rule-bound. The assertion of "Butch on the Streets, Femme in the Sheets" as an identity on one's T-shirt-clad chest claims the right to define one's own sexuality and present it

[1] An earlier draft of this literature review was previously published in 2001 as "Are Butch and Fem Working Class And Anti-Feminist?" *Gender & Society* 15:175-96. It is reprinted here with permission from Sage Publications.

[2] I am uncomfortable with the incessant pairing of butch and femme as inseparable (i.e.,"butch/femme"). Walker (1993, footnote 9) addresses this concern as follows, "I choose not to hyphenate *butch and femme* in order to construct identities that exist separately as well as in combination. To me, the hyphenated version seems to preclude considering the terms independently of one another or in other combinations (such as *butch-butch* and *femme-femme*)." I agree and will use the phrase "butch/femme" only when I specifically discuss a system of dichotomous pairings or interaction.

boldly in public, visible to lesbians and members of a dominant, heteronormative culture. It is a naming of oneself–a narrating of gendered and sexual possibilities.

As lesbian notions of gender and sexuality, butch and femme are interesting because they have been so pervasive in lesbian communities. Whether eager proponents or outspoken opponents, lesbians in the United States have debated the meanings of butch and femme for decades. This is still true today. Indeed, in all the interviews that I completed and the many impromptu conversations that I have had over seven years of researching butch and femme, I have never met a lesbian who had not heard of butch and femme. I have met (and interviewed) lesbians who seriously disagreed with butch or femme practices; lesbians who knew about butch and femme but did not associate themselves with those ideas; and lesbians who identified their deepest essence as butch or femme. But I have never been met with the question, "Butch? Femme? What do you mean?" Curiously, on those occasions when I have asked lesbians to define the terms, a good bit more difficulty ensues.

As it turns out, defining butch or femme seems to be a rather slippery issue among lesbians. Indeed, asking for a definition tends to invoke debate much more than resolution. The debate tends to have specific parts but no definitive end. And, although I've never received a blank stare when asking, "What do butch or femme mean to you," I have also rarely received a decisive answer. One narrator sums up this problematic when she says, "You know when you see it, but you can't really say exactly what it is, you know?" (Sam and Jo, couple interview line 99-100)

Given the relative public silence about lesbianism in dominant culture and the well-recorded history of the fight by lesbians and gay men in the 20th century to create

public space and legitimacy, it is quite remarkable that, on the one hand, knowledge about these two constructs could be so pervasive among lesbians, and, on the other hand, the determination of what butch and femme *are* could remain unresolved. For these reasons, I argue that butch and femme are not about just butches and femmes, as is often assumed by researchers who study only butches and femmes. Instead, I see butch and femme as ways to speak gender and sexuality for lesbians.

Butch and femme are not about *those* lesbians. For that matter, they are not just about lesbians. Butch and femme are about the way that gender and sexuality for lesbians are made coherent in this Western, postmodern, heteronormative culture. As non-standard gender representations and as non-standard sexual identities, butch and femme may teach us quite a lot about heteronormativity.

The chapters within represent a theory of how lesbians produce gendered and sexual (and also class-based and racialized) selves through narrating butch and femme. But my focus is as much on the cultural context in which selves can be produced as on the production of selves themselves. Simply put, my project is to ask lesbians how they think about their place in the social world as lesbians and to analyze their talk to illuminate how heteronormative discourses affect the narrative production of lesbian selves. The research question that I pursue is: What is the narrative organization of butch and femme? That is, how does heteronormativity provide an organized pattern through which lesbians are instructed and instruct others to understand their experiences as lesbians? Through this project, I examine the relationships between 1) individuals and discourses, 2) individuals and communities, and 3) material and symbolic realities. I

begin with a brief history of butch and femme in the 20th century United States and a summary of the debates about butch and femme.

A Brief History of Butch and Femme

Butch and femme emerged during the formation of many semi-public, lesbian communities throughout the United States in the early and middle parts of the 20th century, especially during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (Adam 1987; Faderman 1991; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). Butch and femme provide a unique organizing system of personal representation, interpersonal interaction and community participation. While butch and femme are difficult to define, and many authors hesitate to do so, Rubin (1992) gives a particularly good description of them as follows:

> Butch and femme are ways of coding identities and behaviors that are both connected to and distinct from standard societal roles for men and women. . . . "Femmes" identify as feminine within the larger culture; "butches" identify primarily as masculine or prefer masculine signals, personal appearance, and styles. (467)

Rubin's definition places butch and femme within the broader cultural context of mainstream gender norms, but it also notes a distinction. Thus, femmes tend to conform with gender norms for women with the exception of forming emotional and sexual relationships with women. Butches tend toward gender nonconformity in dress and action as well as in sexual relationships with women. Because they are non-compliant with mainstream gender or sexual norms, butch and femme are defined by Rubin as categories of "lesbian gender." Rubin also notes that butch and femme as stereotypical categories are conceptual frameworks that have organized lesbian communities. The practice of butch or femme and butch/femme interaction have varied over time and by individuals and couples from complete immersion to partial compliance to complete avoidance.

A key question is why butch and femme emerged during the historical period that it did. One should remember the American history into which this brief lesbian history falls. World War II was of particular importance to a history of women. Not only was Rosie the Riveter a harbinger of second wave feminism, but she also symbolizes women's freedom from male dependence, especially for lesbians. Women's involvement in World War II, whether in military service (D'Emilio 1983) or in factory jobs previously reserved for men (Gilmartin 1996), created a space for women to define themselves as workers and as independent sexual entities (D'Emilio 1983; Faderman 1991). Although lesbian identity was formative in the U.S. in the decades prior to World War II, the geographical and financial opportunity to create lesbian communities reached a necessary peak for the formation of public and semi-public lesbian communities during and immediately after World War II (Faderman 1991). A similar effect was taking place among gay male subculture as well (D'Emilio 1983). This physical possibility of public gathering created the space for lesbian subcultures to emerge. Butch and femme emerged with those subcultures (Faderman 1991; Gilmartin 1996; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993).

Many lesbian communities of the 1940s, '50s and '60s had strict rules for their participants–each woman was expected to assume either butch or femme and couple with an opposite partner. In these communities, women were discouraged from remaining undecided, and no couples were to consist of two butches or two femmes (Faderman 1991; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993; Stein 1997). Butch and femme came under fire with the advent of late-1960s and '70s feminisms, especially radical feminism, in which the feminist project is seen as the elimination of masculinity (Abbott and Love

1972:173; Jeffreys 1989 and 1996; Stein 1997:80). Feminist censure of butch and femme assumed that they were recreations of patriarchal gender norms in which butches were necessarily using power over femmes, in the same manner that heterosexual men were viewed as wielding power over women. Pratt (1995) discusses the radical feminist perception of butch and femme as follows: "Often a lesbian considered 'too butch' was assumed to be, at least in part, a male chauvinist. ... Frequently a lesbian who was 'too femme' was perceived as a woman who had not liberated her mind or her body (19)." Authors writing about 1970s lesbian communities tend to concur that butch and femme did disappear or at least go underground during that period (Adam 1987; Case 1989; Franzen 1993; Jeffreys 1989; Pratt 1995; Rubin 1992; Smith 1989; Walker 1993).

With the widespread and lasting impacts of feminisms, a researcher might expect the disappearance of butch and femme to be lasting as well. But, according to many authors, that has not been the case. In the late-1980s and 1990s, butch and femme are said to have reemerged significantly (Case 1989; Faderman 1992; Jeffreys 1989 and 1996; Morgan 1993; Stein 1997; Walker 1993; Whisman 1996). In what has become known as the post-feminist era, debate has centered around whether the reemergence of butch and femme are part of what Faludi (1991) describes as the "backlash" against feminisms or whether 1990s butch and femme are different and more acceptable to feminists than butch and femme of prior decades. Whisman (1996) suggests that lesbians of the 1990s aligned politically and culturally with gay men, often as part of "queer" or lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered movements (LGBT), rather than with straight feminists as was the case in 1970s and 1980s with radical feminism. Thus, the emergence

of feminist and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered civil rights movements provide a political tug of war for lesbian concerns in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Engaging the Debates

The literature on butch and femme is not a simple one to review. It originates from many disciplines, contains political arguments for and against butch and femme, and is written by academic and non-academic authors. With a variety of political and scholarly interests bound up in the literature, there appear to be at least three important debates throughout. The first is a descriptive foregrounding of either gender or sexuality as significant in explaining how butchness or femmeness should be understood. The second debate is whether butch and femme are real or performed. And, the third is who may be involved in practicing butch or femme. After outlining these debates, I describe the various scholarly interests represented in the debates and conclude this chapter by outlining how this study will be situated in the debates.

What *Are* Butch And Femme?

Although authors tend to agree about the time frames in which butch and femme behaviors have been exhibited most noticeably and about feminisms' major impact on butch and femme behaviors, they do not agree on what butch and femme are. How do authors explain their existence? Explanations of butch and femme tend to foreground two aspects: butch and femme as lesbian gender and butch and femme as sexual identities. But is it gender that influences sexuality or sexuality that influences gender?

Butch and Femme as Lesbian Gender

Many authors concentrate on what has come to be seen as the beginning: the stereotypical butch and femme (and the definitional butch/femme) of 1950s bar culture.

Faderman (1991) interprets the emergence of butch and femme among working-class lesbian communities as the result of gendered participation in working-class culture in an era in which the "parent-culture roles [were] exaggerated between men and women" (170), leaving lesbians no other models to follow. Although Faderman valorizes femmeness as a more aggressive sexuality than that exhibited by other women of the 1950s, she views butch and femme largely as heterosexual imitation with butchness as a means of obtaining status as defined by mainstream culture. Faderman implies that these 1950s butch and femme women were simply not aware of any form of organizing into couples except heterosexual roles as taught by mainstream culture.

The interpretation of butchness and of butch/femme as socialized gender roles caused many feminists of the 1970s to oppose butch and femme. The feminist argument against butch and femme hinges on the notion that butch and femme are not exclusively lesbian but are attempting to recreate patriarchy (Abbot and Love 1972: 93-8; Jeffreys 1989 and 1996; Smith 1989; Stein 1997). Jeffreys (1989) writes, "It is the basic building block of feminist theory that women's oppression is maintained by the social construction of masculine and feminine roles (176)." Jeffreys goes on to argue that butch/femme as a dichotomous system of pairing is interpreted as the same as, if not reproduced from, patriarchal norms constructed to oppress women or femmes by giving power to men or butches. For Jeffreys (1996), all gender, including butch and femme, is dominance and submission, which is the origin of all sexism.

Other interpretations of 1950s "butch and femme as lesbian gender" view butch and femme not as gender roles but as gendered constructions that attempt to claim power from an oppressive, dominant gender structure that benefits heterosexual men. In a study

of working-class bar culture in Buffalo, New York, in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis (1993) suggest that butch and femme developed as an organizing system to combat the oppressive structure of gender by creating space for working-class lesbian communities in the pre-civil rights, male-dominated, heterosexist society of that time frame. Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis suggest that one reason that butches developed their personas was as a necessary means of gaining respect from heterosexual men. The display of butchness signaled the intention of, and often resulted in, literally fighting for the right of lesbians to patronize the only bars available to them, usually heterosexual bars in the seedy sections of town. In this interpretation, butch and femme are forms of lesbian gender that attempt to break down the gender structure of mainstream culture.

In addition to sparking supportive arguments regarding butch and femme as gender constructions, radical feminist censure of butch and femme also sparked responses that interpret butch and femme more centrally as aspects of sexuality. Critics argue that radical feminism tends to interpret issues narrowly through the perspectives of its middle-class, generally white authors such that radical feminism does not represent the interests of all lesbians, many of whom view lesbianism as a sexual identity.

Butch and Femme as Sexual Identities

Some of the early objectors to radical feminism's censure of butch and femme (and some more-recent objectors as well) suggest that butch/femme is a complex system of erotic interaction between intimate partners (DeLombard 1995; Hollibaugh and Moraga 1981; Morgan 1993; Nestle 1981 and 1992; Walker 1998 and 2001). These works tend to view butch and femme as one's essential (essentially lesbian) sexual identity and butch/femme interaction as a "natural" result of these innate interests. In describing herself and refuting the supposed oppression of femmes, Nestle (1981) defines

a femme as "a woman who loved and wanted to nurture the butch strength in other women (21)." Supporters of butch and femme as sexual identities discuss the kind of "love" and "nurturing" that occurred between butches and femmes, the origins of those sexual urges, and the gendered practices that resulted from sexual interests and marked one's sexual interests to prospective others.

Curiously, the literature discussing butch/femme sexuality treads somewhat delicately around the composition of that sexuality. As Hollibaugh and Moraga's (1981) title "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With…" alludes to, silences around sexuality have made it difficult to bring the discussion of lesbian sexual practices into public view. Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis (1993) accomplish this discussion through the words of their narrators. One butch narrator, D.J., describes a butch's sexual role (during the 1940s and 1950s) as follows, "I treat a woman as a woman, down to the basic fact it'd have to be my side doin' most of the doin' (191)." In this colloquial sense, butches were expected to be the active partner while femmes were the recipients of butch advances. Indeed, the butchest of butches, the stone butch, was purported to be so involved in that role that stone butches would not allow themselves to be touched sexually by femmes at all (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993).

Of course, the kinds of practices engaged in are very unclear beyond the discussion of active/passive partnerships. It remains unclear as to what body parts were touched or not touched (clitorises? vaginas?) with which body parts (fingers? tongues?) and whether other implements were involved. The discussion is largely encompassed by descriptions of urges "to do" or "have done" and what comprises active or passive engagement. One gets the impression that–not surprisingly–lesbians learned sexual

practices more via sexual experiences than discussion. I address this point more specifically in Chapter 5.

Proponents of "butch and femme as sexual identities" address the implicit critique of active/passive sexual practices as potentially imitative of heterosexuality. Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis (1993) are quick to point out that, although butches were the "doers" and femmes were recipients, the purpose was for butches to give pleasure, not to take it as a heterosexual model suggests. They write, "Yet, unlike what transpires in the dynamics of most heterosexual relationships, the butch's foremost objective was to give sexual pleasure to a femme. It was in satisfying her femme that the butch received fulfillment (191)." Thus, they argue for a revision to the paradigm that "active" means "taker" while "passive" means "out of control."

Other authors provide interesting revisions to the standard notions of active/passive erotic constructions. Nestle (1992) views butch/femme as "a lesbian specific way of deconstructing gender that radically reclaims women's erotic energy (14)." For Nestle, butchness and butch/femme are signals to dominant society of women's erotic independence from oppressive heterosexual norms. Hollibaugh and Moraga (1981) also argue positively for the erotically-charged nature of butch/femme and suggest that feminists should begin to discuss why that eroticism has been shunned. Both authors speak of sexual identity as being established very early in life and of the attraction of opposite sexual identities as part of "natural" sexual desire.

Expressing a supportive position on butch and femme sexuality, Newton and Walton (1984) articulate a popular view that is not often advanced by academic authors. They suggest that many radical feminists who participated so fervently in erasing gender

norms were the same women who had been involved in butch and femme communities in prior decades. These women were simply repressing the butch or femme sexual identities that they held prior to becoming active in radical feminism. One woman retrospectively expresses this sentiment:

> At the height of my college cruising, I was attending Take Back the Night meetings dressed in Mr. Greenjeans overalls, Birkenstocks, and a bowl haircut that made me look like I'd just been released from a bad foster home. There is nothing more pitiful to look at than a closeted femme. (Walker 1993: 866)

In another work, Newton (1984) discusses how the earlier proto-type of the butch lesbian–the "mannish lesbian"–"symbolized the stigma of lesbianism (560)." "Cross-dressing for Hall [Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness*, in which the lead character is a woman who cross-dresses during the W.W.I era] is not a masquerade. It stands for the New Woman's rebellion against the male order and, at the same time, for the lesbian's desperate struggle to be and express her true self (570)." For Newton, butchness is a way of displaying one's sexual identity (one's "true self") via displaying gender non-conformity. Additionally, this display of non-conformity is not play or performance. It is real and it has consequences.

Are Butch and Femme "Real" or Performance?

A primary issue for proponents of butch and femme is the experience of "realness" of these identities. Feminist political arguments against butch and femme as "roles" and theoretical arguments that understand butch and femme as gender constructs rely on the assumption that butch or femme could be developed and, hence, are not innate. The notion that butch and femme could be constructed appears to contest the "realness" of the phenomena. Proponents of butch and femme tend to take issue with these theorists and argue that butch and femme feel innate and that they are not actively

controlled or developed. One may work to more actively display a true self, but the true self is seen as real and original and not consciously developed.

The concept of performance has been applied to re-emergent 1990s butch and femme, describing them as erotic play or symbolic critiques of gender–as styles rather than identities or essences (Case 1989; Faderman 1992). Arguably more fluid and assumable than previously, butch and femme in the 1990s do not necessarily follow the same strict rules of conduct that governed them in previous decades (although some would argue they still do). Performance theorists argue that individuals may assume butchness one day and femmeness the next, or change from butch to femme or vice versa from one relationship to the next.

Faderman (1992) interprets current butch and femme as erotic play or performance that develops erotic tension via dichotomous positions. She suggests that newer butch and femme may be reactions to drab clothing styles introduced by radical feminism and that feminisms have created a more egalitarian setting for butch/femme interaction such that butch/femme is now based on erotic play more than power relations. Faderman's (1992) feminist interpretation of 1990s butch and femme suggests feminists should accept them as erotic play and, thus, not threatening to feminist ideals.

Unlike Faderman's interpretation of 1990s butch and femme as absent of power relations, many authors have argued for feminist interpretations of butch and femme that accept them as means of symbolically combating dominant gender norms (De Lombard 1995; Case 1989; de Lauretis 1994; Lamos 1994; Morgan 1993). Case (1989) offers an interpretation of contemporary butch and femme as campy, erotic play that deconstructs dominant notions of gender. She writes:

> In recuperating the space of seduction, the butch-femme couple can, through their own agency, move through a field of symbols...playfully inhabiting the camp space of irony and wit, free from biological determinism, elitist essentialism, and the heterosexist cleavage of sexual difference. (298)

For Case, butch/femme, when taken together, present a critique to dominant structures of male power (i.e., possession of the phallus). Case suggests that the notion that two women can create an erotic sexuality without men falsifies the heterosexist ideal that sexuality is and must be about men. In her analysis, butch and femme are not identities as much as representations–styles that reduce gender to nothing more than playing dress up. For Case, it is this ability to view gender as play that subverts notions of biologically determined gender. De Lauretis (1994) agrees with Case and asserts:

> . . . butch-femme role-playing is exciting not because it represents heterosexual desire, but because it doesn't; that is to say, in mimicking it, it shows the uncanny distance, like an effect of ghosting, between desire (heterosexually represented as it is) and the representation; and because the representation doesn't fit the actors who perform it, it only points to their investment in a fantasy–a fantasy that can never fully represent them or their desire…(109-110)

Newton (1996), an anthropologist who has studied gay male camp, critiques Case's argument and disagrees that butch and femme are simply camp. Newton suggests that 1990s butch and femme may possess some elements of camp, but that 1950s butch and femme were strikingly absent of the theatricality that was present in gay male camp of the same era. Speaking about butch and femme prior to the late-1980s, Newton writes:

> It [butch/femme] was utterly serious, always "for real," completely different in feeling and tone from the fabulous and bittersweet excesses of the camp drag queen. ...And until performance theorists came along, no one positioned lesbian butch-femme as comparable to drag queen-centered camp, primarily because it had so lacked the element of humor and light theatricality, the self-conscious play which Case [quoted above] endowed it. (164)

The work of Judith Butler provides what might be understood as an important compromise in the debate over "realness." Butler (1996) also equates butch and femme to drag but not as a theatrical performance. Rather, Butler suggests that drag, including butch and femme, is performative as is all gender. Butler sees all gender as a constant and repetitive imitation of an ideal the can never be met. Butler writes, "*…gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself (185, emphasis in original)." So, for Butler, gendered discourses incite performative repetition of an ideal that is itself non-existent–for lesbians or for heterosexuals. But, their constant repetition and reproduction becomes part of self and, thus, feels natural and original. In this sense, Butler's notion of performativity is not theatrical, yet it illustrates how discourses produce subjectivities.

Butler suggests that butch and femme are also performative but that they are subversive of heterosexual gender imperatives because they cite a gendered sexuality that cannot exist under those imperatives. Butler writes, "Reconsider then the homophobic charge that queens and butches and femmes are imitations of the heterosexual real. Here 'imitation' carries the meaning of 'derivative' or 'secondary,' a copy of an origin which is itself the ground of all copies, but which is itself a copy of nothing (185)."

Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of performativity, Kraus (1996) suggests that lesbians of the 1950s used butch and femme as categories of sexuality that were performed and constantly negotiated. Negotiating butch and femme as sexual identities was the "desire work," a term Kraus has coined, these women performed to create lesbian communities. Kraus's argument is much like that of Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis, but

Kraus views butch and femme in terms of sexuality, rather than political resistance to male dominance. Kraus does not view them as erotic play, but discusses them as real identities to the communities that constructed them and argues that their performances had real implications for their performers.

Who does butch and femme?

Judging from the consistency of discussions about 1950s butch and femme, one might expect most lesbian communities of that era to have been ruled by them. However, some authors suggest some lesbian communities rejected butch and femme. Faderman (1991) differentiates between butch and femme maintained by working-class lesbians and the supposed rejection of butch and femme by middle- and upper-class lesbians. Faderman suggests that, even if "one woman in a couple may have been more naturally aggressive or more prone to traditionally feminine activities (175)," these differences were expected to be downplayed, because middle-class lesbians had rules of "propriety (181)." Faderman writes, "It was crucial in the middle-class lesbian subculture to behave with sufficient, though never excessive, femininity and not to call attention to oneself as a lesbian in any way (181)." Newton's (1993) ethnography of the growth of Cherry Grove, Fire Island, from the 1930s to the 1980s also records a division between working-class butch and femme lesbians and an older class of wealthy "ladies." Newton suggests that affluent women avoided butch and femme to hide their stigmatized, lesbian identities from their families. Although it is not specifically stated, Newton's narrators also imply that they distanced themselves from butch and femme to avoid association with vulgar, working-class constructs.

As Faderman and Newton suggest, social hierarchies were expected to transcend sexual urges. Gilmartin (1996) provides insightful testimony from the life history of her

middle-class narrator, P.J., who frequented working-class lesbian bars in Colorado in the 1950s and 1960s, yet emphatically insists, "We Weren't Bar People." Gilmartin concludes that P.J. did indeed engage lesbian communities and share cultural spaces with working-class lesbians but took great pains to separate herself from both the symbolism of working-class culture as less sophisticated and the potential for being publicly recognized as lesbian if she presented herself in certain ways. In my own research (Crawley 2001), social class seems to be an indicator, not of whether one has interests in butch and femme erotics or performances, but in whether and where one is willing to express them. In a review of hundreds of personal ads from the mid-1990s, advertisers who indicated a middle-class status were less likely to call themselves butch or femme but no less likely to be seeking a butch or femme lover. Consistent with Gilmartin, my research suggests not so much a difference in engaging certain sexual practices, but a reluctance for middle-class lesbians to align with what is perceived as working-class.

Some authors attack middle-class centered, radical feminist arguments as elitist (Smith 1989; Walker 1993). Newton and Walton (1984) note the white, middle-class nature of "the modern feminist movement." They suggest it is this middle-class influence that encouraged the "anti-sexual and anti-difference" stance of "the movement" and that "the movement" was ultimately elitist. Walker (1993) agrees:

> The rejection of butch and femme styles by middle- and upper-class women was frequently tinged with the condescending implication that "role-play" was evidence of the backwardness, conservatism, and confusion of working-class lesbians, who were generally depicted as victims of patriarchal brainwashing. (875)

Similarly, Smith (1989) suggests that radical feminism rejected butch and femme because radical feminism had its roots in the "class-bound and anti-sexual lesbian movement of the 1950s and 1960s," largely headed by the assimilationist organization,

Daughters of Bilitis. Smith suggests that the downplaying of lesbian sexuality and similar rejection of butch and femme by radical feminists were a result of their dominant, middle-class backgrounds that de-emphasized sexuality. Thus, Smith argues that women who identify as lesbian for emotional and sexual reasons, especially women of color and working-class women, may not feel represented by this brand of feminism, including radical feminism's condemnation of butch and femme.

Another argument centers not so much on elitism as on the difference between assimilationist and radical politics. As discussed above, Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis' (1993) study of a working-class lesbian community argues that, as lesbian gender, butch and femme are a radical political statement about the dominant structures of gender and sexuality. For their narrators, being butch all the time was a refusal to submit to dominant gender imperatives; it was a working-class act of subversion.

If a discussion of butch and femme and social class is difficult to resolve, a discussion of race is nearly non-existent. Reading the literature on butch and femme in the U.S., one gets the distinct impression that to be lesbian is to be white. Although some ethnographies record the existence of lesbians of color in largely white butch and femme communities–for example, Buffalo, NY (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993)–and others record black lesbian communities that remained largely segregated from white communities–for example Memphis (Buring 1997)–it is unclear how black lesbian identities or the identities of other lesbians of color have been specifically impacted by the influence of racism. Several authors of Black Feminist Thought have discussed the complicated interplay of race, class, gender and sexual orientation for lesbians of color

(Clarke 1981; hooks 1989; Lorde 1984; Omosupe 1991). But the relevance of butch and femme to lesbians of color remains unclear and understudied.

Buring's narrators explain that butch and femme were Eurocentric terms that were sometimes adopted by black lesbians during the mid-century but sometimes not. Buring's narrators suggest that "bulldagger" was a much more common (although pejorative) term for lesbians within African-American culture. Omosupe (1991) agrees on this point. Additionally, Buring adds that younger narrators discussing lesbian communities of the 1980s and 1990s rejected butch and femme terms altogether. Walker (2001) explains the politics of erasure for femmes and for lesbians of color as particular issues that make visibility difficult. She writes:

> Each of these assumptions contributes to the double invisibility of the lesbian of color within the white lesbian community; she is invisible first as a lesbian, and then there is no perception of her sexual style. …That is to say, while a butch woman of color might not be recognized as a lesbian because she is not white, she might be perceived as lesbian because her sexual style is considered 'blatant.' A femme woman of color, on the other hand, will probably not be recognized as lesbian, first because she is not white and then because she is not butch. (207)

In my own experience, the recording of experiences for lesbians of color is difficult because so much segregation exists between white lesbians, who tend to have access to and control of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered resources, and lesbians of color, who often choose not to assimilate into those largely white spaces to access "lesbian" communities. The denial about de facto segregation in contemporary U.S. culture is immense and remains more than a social problem. Clearly, it is a research issue and, hence, an impediment to knowledge production as well.

What Do We Want to Know About Butch and Femme and Who Is Asking the Questions?

Much of the difficulty in sorting out the debates about butch and femme, as well as most debates about gender and sexualities, results from the multi-disciplinary origins of the debaters. The authors are writing from different disciplines; hence, they are engaged in different kinds of projects. Although butch and femme comprise a common topic, not all authors are trying to accomplish the same scholarly or political goals. In this section, I outline the basic varieties of knowledge projects produced on butch and femme. I sum up my discussion by locating this project both inside and outside those categories.

Community Studies: What's It Like Where You Are?

Ethnographies, or community studies, are a common style of research project that records the existence of specific communites during particular historical periods. This project style is undertaken, by historians and anthropologists alike, to record the social practices of people in certain geographic regions. Some excellent examples of community studies involving lesbians include Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis' (1993) study of Buffalo, New York during the 1940s, '50s and '60s; Buring's (1997) study of 1950s to 1990s Memphis; Newton's (1993) study of 1930s to 1980s Cherry Grove, Fire Island; Gilmartin's (1996) study of 1950s and '60s communities in Colorado; and Franzen's (1993) study of Albuquerque during the period 1965 to 1980.

The academic project of community studies is simply to document the existence of certain cultural practices. The communities are expected to stand as testaments only to their own existence. Hence, none are expected to be "representative" of phenomena in any other place or time and especially not to reference some all-encompassing idea of

human existence. The best we can hope is to collect as many studies as possible to identify likenesses across time or place.

Positivists: How Can We Measure Butch and Femme Accurately?

Positivists begin with completely different assumptions. The positivists work to verify and measure specific phenomena–for example, butch and femme among lesbians–including other factors correlating with their identification. These scholars tend to assume that any lesbian identified as butch or femme is somehow true or real and assume the fixity of these identities–a fixity that transcends time or place. Among this group, the social and political conditions required to allow for butch and femme to exist as identities are often assumed or ignored. True to their positivistic stance, these scholars tend to be more methodologically concerned with accurate measurement. Presumably there is something real to measure.

The research tends to rely on large-scale surveys administered to self-identified lesbians with a vast field of questions to be answered. Included in past positivistic measurements of butch and femme are: the correlation of butch and femme with social class (Weber 1996); sex roles and power balance in relationships (Caldwell and Peplau 1984; Lynch and Reilly 1986; Rosenzweig and Lebow 1992); the existence of "butch-femme dichotomies" among gay men (Haist and Hewitt 1974); and whether butch and femme correlate to why non-lesbians may dislike lesbians (Laner and Laner 1980).

I, too, may be counted among the researchers intent on "counting" butch's and femme's existence among lesbians. In my article "Are Butch and Femme Working-Class and Anti-Feminist? (Crawley 2001)," I count the existence of the terms butch and femme in lesbian personal ads over three decades. While my study was certainly empirical, I hope it can be seen as not so adamantly in search of "accuracy" as it is concerned with

historical trends of how lesbians report their identities to each other. In this way, I see it as tracing political trends, hopefully without falling prey to the general critique of overly positivistic work.

A serious critique of this school of thought is the possibility of "accurately" measuring so slippery a subject as one that is historically-situated, as subjectivity theorists suggest. Regardless of the putative "objective" nature of these studies and belying the politics that do exist in them, many of these studies include politically loaded language in their results. For example, "no evidence of role-playing" was a finding of more than one study (Caldwell and Peplau 1984; Lynch and Reilly 1986). The theorists that I describe below would take exception to the attribution of butch and femme as role-playing, suggesting a concern for the heterosexist assumption that is implicit in attributing butch and femme to "role-playing" (i.e., imitating heterosexuality).

Philosophies, Politics and Theories: Is There a Lesbian Subjectivity?

Much less concerned with interpreting "data" about lesbians, a variety of scholars from many disciplines are engaged in theoretical arguments relating to the existence and political impact of lesbian *subjectivities*. This project considers the possibility of the existence of the category "lesbian" (usually in 20th century U.S. culture), often including the political factors that coalesce to produce both the category and the person (Bulter 1990 and 1993; Case 1989; Emery 2002). This project theorizes "lesbians" as a social category of late 19th century/20th century invention. Often based on Foucaldian notions of subjects and subjectivities, this project begins with an assumption that runs counter to liberal political thought. A rational actor is not presumed. In this project, lesbians do not create their subjectivities or agentically fashion their identities. Rather, discourses of desire and gender incite a certain kind of subject to exist. Lesbians do not define

themselves. Rather, historically available discourses (roughly defined as prevailing political and social ideas) define and produce "lesbians." The project is not about how individual lesbians define themselves and their communities, but about how certain forms of thought allow for lesbians to exist as a category. As a result, this project focuses on histories and discourses as much as the lesbians who purportedly occupy them.

A related project focuses on lesbian *politics* and responds to Freudian and sexological thought of the early 20th century that understood female same-sex eroticism as pathological or underdeveloped psychosis (D'Emilio 1983; Emery 2002; Faderman 1981; Ned Katz 1995). As a result, much scholarly theorizing has worked to produce a credible moral position for female same-sex erotic expression. The project among these writers is to understand the available subjectivities of lesbianism and the historical conditions that made each possible. For example, some issues include: "What is she like? (Ainley 1995);" "What are the politics of looking like what you are? (Walker 1993, 1998 and 2001);" "Can there be a masculinity without men? (Halberstam 1998);" and "How shall we imagine lesbian sexuality in the 1990s? (Creith 1996)" This project focuses on the cultural representations of lesbianism, especially via media.

In both projects, understanding the relationship of texts to knowledge production is of primary concern. A common, anecdotal critique of this style of work (and I think a common concern of some of its authors) is that this project is often not accessible to the lay reader. The lived experience of butchness or femmeness is overshadowed by the expertness of the theories provided. Individual lesbians are all but silent. The last category in my schema of lesbian knowledge-making attempts to address this problem.

Dyke Description: Let Me Tell You How I Feel.

Concurrent with the advent of second wave feminism and lesbian and gay civil rights movements, lesbians seem to have been compelled to write about their own experiences as the official and authoritative record of lesbianism. (See for example Abbot and Love 1972, Grahn 1984, Martin and Lyon 1972). Much of this work has the feel of authors frustrated over the "incorrect" representation of themselves and their lives in (largely positivistic) academic texts and politically-motivated popular texts, especially during the late 1960s to early 1980s era. These authors base the legitimacy of their writings on their own life experiences. Some activist scholars wrote in this style to call for political attention to feminist censure of butch and femme (Hollibaugh and Moraga 1981; Nestle 1981). More recent examples still wrestle with feminist ideals and the appropriateness of pursuing butch or femme interests (De Lonbard 1995). Other examples of this style include collections of dyke descriptions of many non-academic authors, often with some editing and analysis on the part of the more academically trained editor (Ainley 1995; Burana, Roxxie and Due 1994; Harris and Crocker 1997; Nestle 1992; Weston 1996).

These works incite academic theorists to include lesbian voices critiquing academic theory as not descriptive of "real" lesbian lives (Esterberg 1997). But as dyke description has developed, more traditionally trained academics have gotten into the game by combining personal life experiences with analyses. (Hollibaugh 2000; Munt 1998a and 1998b). These works have now become both deeply theoretical and personally empirical. Again, I find my own work relating to these genres as one of my own publications is produced in this style, which combines academic analysis with personal testament (Crawley 2002). I include that article as Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

This dissertation relies on all these projects to complete my task. But it utilizes only strategic instances of each to attempt a different project. I am sympathetic to the goals of many of these projects. I applaud efforts to document lesbian history in communities to include these histories in the knowledge base of human experiences. I also applaud efforts of lesbians to record their own lives. If academics strive to document and analyze human experience, surely lesbians' records of their own lives will be valuable in this project. I find it useful to "count" lesbians, given certain ethical parameters and credible assumptions. Counting is another form of documenting and is invaluable in evaluating certain measures–for example, social inequalities. I am especially intrigued by theories of lesbian subjectivities. I find the relationship between discourses and individuals a defining interest of sociology. I agree that discourses create limited subject positions, which greatly complicates the possibility of a free-thinking, rational actor. But I worry about the disappearance of the individual from theories of lesbian subjectivities. A free-thinking, rational actor with full autonomy and agency may be a simplistic notion. But as sociologists well know, individuals do speak. As Blumer asserted, the empirical world has a tendency to "talk back" to social science. Blumer writes:

> One errs if he [sic] thinks that since the empirical world can exist for human beings only in terms of images or conceptions of it, therefore reality must be sought in images or conceptions independent of an empirical world. Such a solipsistic position is untenable and would make empirical science impossible. The position is untenable because of the fact that the empirical world can "talk back" to our pictures of it or assertions about it–talk back in the sense of challenging and resisting, or not bending to, our images or conceptions of it. This resistance gives the empirical world an obdurate character that is the mark of reality. (22)

Here Blumer still gives the academician too much legitimacy, in that his description places academicians as the scribes of "our" social science. But he offers an

important reminder that the empirical world talks. Individuals do speak and, although their stories may be constrained by publicly available discourses, they still participate in the telling. My project is not so much to argue about authorship as it is to listen to lesbian's self stories. By listening to their stories of self, I hope to learn, not just about the ways that self is constructed, but what stories of self tell us about the discourses that make them possible.

Changing the Analysis:

Butch and Femme as Narrative Resources for Storying Selves

In this dissertation, I have two goals. First, I intend to listen and take seriously lesbians' ideas of them/selves. As a self-described lesbian and one who is sympathetic to the lives of women who are non-normatively sexual, I want to believe lesbians and allow them to tell me what is pertinent regarding whom they think they are in the social world. Second, I ask not whether butch and femme are "real" (that is, the origins of urges) but why the need for realness is important. That is, I use lesbians' stories of self to analyze, not so much lesbians, as the discourses that lesbians have at their disposal to story a self.

More specifically, I investigate how lesbians narrate butch and femme as parts of self and as means to participate in communities and disrupt institutions. I begin with the assumption that butch and femme are narrative resources for storying selves (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Drawing from a constructionist perspective, the project is concerned less with what butch and femme *are*, than with *how they are used* to make sense of lesbian lives. Hence, I understand butch and femme as useful ideas emergent from the local experiences of women with non-normative sexual interests living in a heterosexist, deeply gendered, everyday world. And, I argue that the notions of butch and femme tell

us as much about the world in which we all live as about the individual lesbians themselves.

Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) notion of the narrative self we live by works to explain how butch and femme as narrative resources can be both elective and not fully conscious. It borrows from and augments Foucaldian notions of subjectivity by attending to how the individual process of person production works, all the while understanding how the available subject positions provide options for what may be understood as socially possible. In this way, we can understand both the individual experience of person production as well as the disciplining of individuals into proscribed subjectivities.

The project is based on interviews with focus groups, couples and individuals with lesbians in and around a suburban, university town. I purport that the narrators of my project represent, not just a geographic community (although I recognize that certain features of this community will reflect some traits of the rural/suburban South, where it is located), but a position in suburban US life that straddles a national LGBT "community" replete with a barrage of nationally available media, stigma from the dominant US culture, local community organizing, relationship issues, and a search to define self and make sense of the world. It represents not so much a place (although I am proud to offer a queer viewpoint that is not from hyper-urban New York or San Francisco) as it is discourses and experiences that allow lesbians in suburban settings to construct stories of self.

In this introductory chapter, I have summarized the literature and debates on butch and femme to date. Chapter 2 of the dissertation outlines the amalgamation of methods that I used for this research. In this chapter, I briefly discuss a variety of

interpretive approaches proposed by several authors and explain how each aided in completing my analysis in these chapters. Taking seriously the notion of a "sociology of stories" (Plummer 1995) and storied selves (Holstein and Gubrium 2000), I provide my own story of self in Chapter 3, both to situate myself in relationship to my narrators and to advance a theory of butchness as an interpretation and display of ableness for female-bodied persons. In the remaining chapters in the dissertation, I analyze the talk of my narrators and address in detail the self "stories" of my narrators.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how the discourses surrounding butch and femme encourage a sense of measurement of public lesbian selves. In doing so, I note the ways in which lesbians continue to be held accountable to heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality and produce a scientistic standard around which conformity and subjectivity can be understood.

Chapter 5 focuses on the production of private lesbian selves and the limited language available for understanding sexuality outside of heteronormative models. Noting the pervasiveness of physical science metaphors, in particular "opposites attract," I argue that butch/femme becomes a default model for understanding lesbian sexuality, given that any possibility of an erotics of likeness or sameness is squelched by accountability to heteronormative models.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss some variations of self-narration among lesbians based on material circumstances including class, race and age difference. Having noted these differences, I make some conjectures about the impacts of second wave and third wave feminisms on lesbian political generations. In sum, I hope this project informs

lesbians and theorists how an analysis of everyday talk can illuminate the power of discourse and of individuals' discursive practices.

CHAPTER 2
LOOKING UP AT DISCOURSE: INTERPRETIVE THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES OF SELF PRODUCTION

Although this project is based on a theoretically well-developed interpretive tradition in sociology (for a brief review of the interpretive tradition, see Holstein and Gubrium 1994), there is no singular, easily identifiable method that I utilized in accomplishing this project. Indeed, a step-by-step methodology that produces a concrete answer is anathema to the interpretive tradition. Instead, I used the ideas of many methodologists working within the interpretive tradition, piecing together their various additions to the interpretive paradigm, to address my research question. Ultimately, I want to know how lesbians come to understand self and what those stories of self tell us about the everyday world in which we live. Tactically, I accomplish this through focus groups, couples and individual interviews, fieldwork and autoethnography. Hence, this chapter on methodology proposes to explain, not just the actual research techniques that I employed, but the theoretical underpinnings of those approaches.

In this chapter, I investigate how selves are produced through talk. In doing so, I address how we can theorize the construction of symbolic selves while honoring the world of material experiences. I begin by introducing Plummer's (1995) interactionist notion of "a sociology of stories" to explain why sexual and gendered life stories are relevant to understanding culture. Next, I discuss the usefulness of theorizing storied selves and introduce Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) notion of the "self we live by," which is created through interpretive practice. In order to attend to feminist concerns of

inequality, I augment the discussion with Dorothy Smith's notion of "looking up" at institutions from the perspective of the individual. Having established a methodological agenda, I conclude by outlining the research design and parameters and some "real world" complications to that design that recognizes the sometimes messy issues of being both researcher and community member.

Understanding a World of Stories

In *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), Ken Plummer produces a decidedly interactionist theory of the social world when he writes, "Society itself may be seen as a textured but seamless web of stories emerging everywhere through interaction: holding people together, pulling people apart, making societies work (5)." Reality, for Plummer, is a world of stories we tell to each other and ourselves to make sense of our lives. Our stories comprise our experiences, thoughts, feelings and the narratives available to produce them. They provide for us the means for everyday people to understand everyday lives. Plummer sees stories as a prime site for social science investigation. Hence, researchers are not describing a concrete reality (in which positivistic Scientists, with a capital "S," are interested) as much as a social reality produced by and for everyday people. Nonetheless, this social reality has consequences for human interaction (Thomas and Thomas 1928). It becomes real.

Plummer's main concern is the production of sexual stories. He notes a proliferation of sexual stories in the late 20th century. He wants to know, not so much what kind of sex is practiced, but what kind of knowledge is available about sexual interaction to produce changes in the ways sexuality is understood and discussed. What kinds of stories are being told? Why are they being told now, as opposed to some point in

the past? What stories are not told? Through analyses of stories about sex, Plummer attends to not just sexuality but a cultural climate that makes certain kinds of discussions possible. In a very nearly Foucauldian approach, Plummer concentrates not so much on how the discourses/stories produce certain kinds of subjects but on how the stories themselves could have come into being. Like Foucault (1977 and 1978), Plummer is concerned with the specific discourses that are available at specific points in history. But he wants to know how a variety of new stories proliferate from those discourses. He provides a five step generic process for the telling of sexual stories: imagining, articulating, inventing identities, creating social worlds and communities, and creating a culture of public problems.[3] Through this process, Plummer notes that in the everyday world, people make sense of their realities through the only discourses available to them.

Plummer would understand the production of butch and femme as just such a sexual story. Butch and femme emerged in the mid-20th century–in the very historical moment in which Plummer notes a proliferation of sexual stories. It is interesting to note that although butch and femme are often discussed as gendered constructs as I noted in Chapter 1, they appeared on the social landscape as a sexual story–one of butches as the sexual performer while femmes were the sexual recipients (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). Myriad other stories have augmented butch and femme stories since then, including different accounts of sexual aggressiveness and their relationship to gender. Whether sexual urges rule gendered performances or gendered interests rule sexual practices, it is clear that the language of sexual urges and gendered interests are

[3] It is worth noting that Plummer does not see this as a simple linear process with distinct phases. Rather, he is simply identifying the generic parts of the process that allows sexual stories to emerge through social interaction.

inextricably intertwined. But sexual stories are not just free floating discourses about social worlds; they are intimately crafted stories of self. Plummer writes, "The focus here is neither on the solitary individual life (which is in principle unknown and unknowable), nor on the text (which means nothing standing on its own), but on *the interactions which emerge around story telling.* Stories can be seen as *joint actions* (20)." People are understood as active producers of stories. Hence, a theory of social selves is necessary.

Narrating Social Selves

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) provide just such a notion of a narrative self by noting that the self is not simply an abstract process or structure that can be referred to in unitary terms. Instead, they ground the self in the everyday, local world as an interactionally-produced entity by which individuals understand their experiences. They suggest that social selves should be understood as "selves we live by." By this, they mean the self is a story about ourselves that individuals agentcially create from socially available narrative resources–locally produced social narratives that explain experiences and positions in the culture (i.e., identities). Their theory is based in a pragmatist tradition of modern theories of self, which bears a brief explanation here.

The modern notion of self has been a key sociological concept for nearly as long as sociology has existed. Although other pragmatists theorized about the self, Mead's notion of self is a distinctively social and, hence, sociologically useful one. Mead's general thesis is that the self emerges through social interaction. Arguing against Freud's internal ego and Watson's social conditioning theories, Mead's (1934) notion of self is neither existent prior to social interaction nor wholly determined by social institutions. It is mutually implicated in and constructed through social interaction. Mead writes, "The

self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience (140)." Mead's assertion is that the self *exists* (it is a social object or "thing") but only because of its production through social interaction. The nature of self as object is of central importance to Mead because, as an object, the self exists apart from the body or natural entity. It exists as a social entity–an entity of language, neither before nor separate from the meaning making that occurs through language.

Mead characterizes the production of self as an internal conversation using significant symbols. Social interaction is comprised of meaningful symbols (i.e., language) offered as "verbal gestures." Mead suggests that thought begins with an attempt to predict what an "other" is thinking and then proceeds with an individual expression of how to react to the predicted thoughts of others. As a reaction to the behaviors of others, Mead's understanding of thought is one that must be emergent through social interaction. Neither thought nor self can exist outside the social world.

Borrowing from Mead, Blumer (1969) took off with this notion of "objects" in "the 'worlds' that exist for human beings" in his development of the "position of symbolic interaction (10)." Blumer is concerned with the process of meaning-making through interactions among individuals. His notion of the social world is the world of meanings that actors construct and use for interaction. Further, Blumer argues that the self emerges in everyday social interaction. This tradition provides just the support that Holstein and Gubrium need to describe thinking, creative selves that are bound by the social stories available to narrate lives.

In Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) formulation, the self is accomplished through the process of *interpretive practice,* which is comprised of both *discursive practice* and

discourses-in-practice. The notion of discursive practice borrows from ethnomethodologists the idea that selves are not just a substantive thing but also a social accomplishment. They are practices to be "done." The aim is to note how members speak themselves into existence via their own use of theory–produced as stories of self. Using their own discursive practices, how do they accomplish the selves they set out to define?

But Holstein and Gubrium also want to know about substantive constraints on constructing that self. This is their notion of discourses-in-practice. Using a Foucauldian notion of cultural discourses, they describe how narratives about self are constrained by the local discourses that are already in place in the local, everyday experience. Selves cannot be freely bandied about. They are constrained by meaningful discourses, or narrative resources, from which members must borrow. Narrative resources are the stories from which we draw in discursive practice and are constrained by the discourses-in-practice that regulate the available stories to be told. For example, "man," "woman," "heterosexual," "bisexual," are linguistic resources that define for us the meaning of bodies and the varieties of sexuality that may define them. It is unfathomable to speak of gender or sexuality existing outside many of these predefined notions.

One further theoretical note should made before trying to understand how butch and femme are storied. The process of interpretive practice is one that must always take place within *local culture* (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). The world of our experience is a local one–one of tactical interaction for each of us. Because it is formed through our interactive experiences, the culture that is available in the local, everyday setting is the

framework that we must use for understanding our experiences. Hence, it must be clear that interpretive practice is always situated within local culture for each individual.

Thus, interpretive practice is both creative and constrained. It is accomplished in the local, everyday experience of interaction and reflects the story of self that each individual uses to make sense of their experiences.

Butch and Femme and Heteronormativity

Butch and femme, then, are stories that emerge from a particular location within a historically-specific social system (the intersections of gender and sexuality for women with same-sex desires in a patriarchal, heterosexist, Western culture). Patriarchally proscribed notions of gender (Lorber 1994)[4] and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1986) are discourses that limit and constrain the ways in which intimate interaction can be imagined, discussed, and made coherent (Jeffreys 1996). Ingraham (1996) pushes these concepts together to argue that gender theorists should not speak of "gender" but rather of "heterogender" because dominant constructions of gender are so bound with notions of sexuality as to "naturalize the institution of heterosexuality (179)." Richardson (1996) agrees, referring to "heteronormativity" or the "institutionalized …form of practice and relationships, of family structure, and identity. It is constructed as a coherent, natural, fixed and stable category; as universal and monolithic (2)." With the pervasiveness of the heterogendered discourse, there is no possibility of stepping completely outside this coherence system. However, there are ways to negotiate within it.

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[4] An incredibly large literature provides both theory and empirical evidence of the notion of patriarchal gender. Lorber's *Paradoxes of Gender* (1994) provides a very useful and extensive review of that literature.

Through the artful process of self-production, lesbians use aspects of the heteronormative discourse. That is, lesbians create self through the culturally mandated, institutionalized sexual story to which we are all bound and which makes all gender coherent. But through notions of butch and femme, lesbians also restructure and critique the heteronormative system. Holstein and Gubrium (1997; 2000) note that selves are not just produced in totality but, rather, are artfully constructed and narratively composed. Through the process of composing a self, a member uses several narrative tools. One, in particular, is narrative editing, in which members actively retell a familiar tale however with unfamiliar twists. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) write, "[People narrating self] needn't reproduce particular coherences, even if there are local imperatives suggesting that they do so, although storytellers are accountable for veering off locally preferred courses (113)." Fortunately for lesbians, occupying non-normative sexual status provides an opportunity to narratively and interactionally edit dominant notions of heterogender. Heteronormativity may be constraining, but, as Holstein and Gubrium (2000) add, the telling of personal stories (that is, narrative practice) allows individuals to exert agency by actively constructing themselves within the regulatory constraints of the coherent discourses. Hence, as actively constructed non-normative positions in the normative discourses of gender and sexuality, butch and femme actually talk lesbians into being. Butch and femme are pervasive and persistent over time as constructs, not because they imitate heterosex, but because the regulatory regimes of heteronormativity have been so ever-present and oppressive in 20th century U.S. culture. Once "butch" and "femme" categories have been talked into being, they become narrative resources for the further future production of selves, communities and political resistance.

The Coherence of Heteronormativity as a Going Concern

Before moving on, I think a brief note on coherence is important. Narrative resources must always be coherent within the discourses on which they depend. They are not free floating and randomly created. They work within the pervasive discourses that make a particular culture coherent. To argue that narrative resources must be coherent is not to suggest they are accurate, real or removed from political interests. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Linde (1993), a linguist, notes that coherence is "a property of texts" (12) that has more to do with the familiarity of actors with a particular kind of story or setting, than any absolute truth. Coherence is largely a context in which speaking can be understood. Linde writes:

> Coherence must also be understood as a cooperative achievement of the speaker and the addressee; it is not an absolute property of a disembodied, unsituated text. The speaker works to construct a text whose coherence can be appreciated, and at the same time the addressee works to reach some understanding of it as a coherent text and to communicate that understanding (12).

Here Linde addresses speech acts in much the same way Goffman (1959) described performative presentations of self. Both theorists suggest that actors/speakers are responsible to each other to accomplish a coherent interaction. Hence, both must use a recognizable context to accomplish an interaction with an other.

Linde goes on to say that, linguistically, this is accomplished via coherence systems–a "global cultural device for structuring experience into socially sharable narrative (163)." The interesting feature of Linde's notion of coherence systems is the interplay between "expert" knowledge and "common sense." She writes:

> A coherence system of the type discussed here is a system of beliefs that occupies a position midway between **common sense** –the beliefs and relations between beliefs that any person in the culture may be assumed to know (if not to share) and that anyone may use–and **expert systems**,

> which are beliefs and relations between beliefs held, understood, and properly used by experts in a particular domain. A coherence system is a system of beliefs derived from some expert system, but used by someone with no corresponding expertise or credentials. (163, emphasis in original)

In making the claim of a difference between "experts" and lay persons, I do not believe Linde intends to reify some hierarchy of knowledge. At least, that is not my intention. Rather, the distinction provides for the means by which so-called expert knowledge can be taken out of theoretical context by a lay person. My colleagues often differentiate between scholarship and what might be called "pop sociology or psychology." For example, the notion that men are from Mars and women are from Venus is patently ridiculous to a scholarly gender theorist, but nonetheless it is used to support any number of political interests, given that the book suggesting such an idea (Gray 1992) was widely discussed in the popular media. Probably originating from Freudian notions of gender difference, it greatly misreads the scholarly work produced on gender, especially the well-developed literature on the essentialism/constructionism debate. Still, in practice, individuals nationwide probably use it to theorize their own life situations because it seems to shore up the existence of gender difference in U.S. culture today.

Thinking of heteronormativity as a coherence system offers not just a notion of how these ideas are spread as discourse, but a means of understanding how the original works of Freud, Kinsey, and others have been read and interpreted and reinterpreted by a variety of "experts" and lay theorists for a variety of political interests. In addition to academically produced theory (which, of course, is also embroiled in political concerns but at least hopefully is bound by some ethic of procedure and depth of analysis or critique), the concept of coherence systems provides the voice of the lay person in

theorizing from the narratives available through so-called common sense. Noting the potential for misinterpretation is not so much about who gets it right or gets it wrong but how lay persons use theory that is mediated by the politics of popular media sources. For as Linde argues, we can only speak of what makes sense, not only to the speaker but to the listener as well.

Linde's notion of coherence systems as a means for theorizing everyday lives illuminates how particular stories about sexuality and gender persist over time even with little scholarly support. As Rubin argues in "The Traffic in Women (1975)," Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the preeminence of the phallus may work as description of the social world but it is no justification for men's on-going political power. Nonetheless, individual men (and often women too) continue to justify their own sexist behavior based on some essentialist belief that possession of the penis is somehow better than possession of a vagina. With little scholarly utility, Freudian theory still pervades common sense understanding and usage. Sex is still understood as something men do to women (Frye 1992) and gender is still understood as inherent in the body (Lorber 1993, 1994, and 1996). Speaking through the discourses of heteronormativity is to some degree required for notions about sexuality and gender to be coherent. Indeed, lesbians may well wish to express selves that are outside of heteronormativity, but doing so may render them unintelligible.

Nonetheless, I have been in a quandary as to how Lorber (1994) and others can talk of gender as institutionalized and yet there is no institution–no place to go, no building to house the texts. How, then, can gender be institutional? Everett C. Hughes (1971) provides the solution by recognizing that "institutions," as the preferred object of

analysis for sociologists, have been over-legitimized as actual places or definable organizations. Instead, Hughes is interested in more ethereal arrangements he calls "going concerns," which he defines as "having existed at least long enough to have been seen" and as "having a present existence and an historical dimension (54)." The coherence of heteronormativity becomes a going concern for individuals speaking their selves. The institutional character of gender/heteronormativity derives from the commitment of people to keep speaking it–to continue to use it as a coherence system. Unfortunately, as the only coherence system that is widely available, most individuals are left with little choice but to reference heteronormativity and, hence, maintain it as a going concern. Heteronormativity, then, as institutional coherence system, perpetuates itself as a going concern for members as they speak their ideas, concerns, interests and selves into being.

Looking Up at Institutionalized Heteronormativity

In this project, I begin from the view of the individual looking up at the institutionalized going concern of heteronormativity. In writing what she calls a "Sociology for Women," Dorothy Smith (1987) suggests a method (which she calls institutional ethnography) of "looking up" at institutions from the individual's point of view.[5] Smith argues that this method illuminates the workings of institutions by noting the processes of participation in those institutions. She wants to understand how "social relations exist as extended sequences of action which link together individuals'

[5] While Dorothy Smith expressly speaks of a "Sociology for Women" and "institutional ethnography" in her book *The Everyday World as Problematic,* the notion of "looking up" at institutions from the perspective of the individual was one she communicated during a group discussion of Institutional Ethnography that I attended at the August 2000 meetings of the American Sociological Association in Washington, D.C.

experiences and institutional processes (Grahame 356)." Smith's assumption is that institutional discourse is in the speech of those participating in and ruled by that institution. Institutional language is there because it is practiced and it is available and because to avoid using institutional language would render the interaction incoherent. She envisions institutional processes as the "relations of ruling" that affect individual experience as "bifurcated consciousness."

Smith's overarching concern is for the oppression of women, understood through women's lived experiences rather than through extralocal structures of knowledge. She situates her work as feminist standpoint research. Centrally concerned with understanding raced, classed and gendered oppression (in the Marxist sense), it is definitionally a critical perspective (Calhoun 1995; Denzin 1994). Smith suggests that late capitalism has helped to create a social atmosphere in which such ideas as markets, government, and politics become reified into larger-than-life structures with anonymous actors that remove consciousness from the everyday, local world. She defines the relations of ruling as follows: "When I write of 'ruling' in this context I am identifying a complex of organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power (3)."

This complex ordering of social life creates an atmosphere in which emphasis is placed on the "extralocal," rather than the local. Further, the extralocal, disembodied relations of ruling exist largely as institutional discourses that organize everyday lives. Institutional discourse exists beyond the individuals who participate in institutions.

Smith writes, "The relations of ruling are rationally organized. They are objectified, impersonal, claiming universality. Their gender subtext has been invisible (4)."

The rational, universal understanding of institutional processes creates what Smith calls bifurcated consciousness–a split between the "knower" and the "known." She writes, "Forms of consciousness are created that are properties of organization or discourse rather than of individual subjects (3)." Consciousness is removed from the individual and given to systems. Smith writes:

> Entering the governing mode of our kind of society lifts the actor out of the immediate local and particular place in which she is in the body. She uses what becomes present to her in this place as a means to pass beyond it to the conceptual order. This mode of action creates a bifurcation of consciousness, a bifurcation, of course, that is present for all those participating in this mode of action. It establishes two modes of knowing, experiencing, and acting–one located in the body and in the space that it occupies and moves into, the other passing beyond it. And although I have made use of the feminine pronoun in general, it is primarily men who are active in this mode. (82)

Importantly, Smith sees this consciousness as a gendered consciousness in that the relations of ruling are largely structured by men and exclusionary of women's voices. Since women's lives are often required to be centered around the local and men can often escape their relationship to the local, bifurcated consciousness is particularly troubling for women. Women's voices are often excluded from the realm of the extralocal, public ruling apparatus, yet their experiences in the local are not taken as a basis for knowledge. Hence, men not only control the ruling apparatus, they largely own knowledge.

Billed as a "sociology for women" (Smith 1987) and a "strategy for feminist inquiry," (DeVault 1999) Smith's critique of current sociological practice is a distinctively feminist one (Olesen 1994). In particular, she is critical of the notion of objectivity that establishes a knower/known relationship in which scientists are called to

observe respondents and report on them from the distance, producing knowledge for the ruling regime, rather than knowledge for women.

To address the shortcomings that Smith notes in current sociological practice, she devises an alternate method, institutional ethnography, as a feminist method of inquiry. Institutional ethnography is a means of putting the everyday world at the center of study. The everyday world is taken as the site of study–the problematic–of sociology (Grahame 1998). In this way both the relations of ruling and the world of the everyday (as organized by the relations of ruling) are exposed. Smith writes:

> Locating the standpoint of women in the everyday world outside the text (in which the text is written and is read) creates a whole new set of problems to be solved, problems of the relationship between text and reader, problems of how to write texts that will not transcribe the subject's actualities into the relations of ruling, *texts that will provide for their readers a way of seeing further into the relations organizing their lives.* (emphasis added, 47)

To create an institutional ethnography, a researcher must start from the narratives produced and practiced in the everyday world. The researcher must engage in observation of everyday practice and in interviewing people about their local, everyday lives *from the standpoint of experiencing those everyday practices and narratives.*

Using institutional ethnography, one does not view "the field" as a site, the thing studied, or become overly concerned with the poetics of representation. Instead, Smith compels us to study *local practice* in order to shed light on the discourses and organizing structures that hold these local cultures in place. The aim is to understand local practices from the standpoint of practitioners so as to understand the actual structuring powers of institutionalized discourses.

The works of Smith, Plummer and Holstein and Gubrium segue nicely because they have much in common. All three envision themselves as pragmatists–interested in

the everyday world of social interaction. Their interests lie not in texts themselves but the narratives produced through locally-situated, historically-specific social interaction. Plummer is especially consistent with Holstein and Gubrium's approach. Both find a basis in Foucauldian notions of discourse within interpretive notions of social practice. Their differences lie largely in their divergent focus. Holstein and Gubrium are concerned with the kinds of selves that can be narrated within specific local cultures. They address the narratives that produce certain types of individuals: What kinds of identities are available to exist within cultural settings? Plummer focuses on the stories told by individuals with greatest concern for what can be learned about the social context: What do the individuals' stories tell us about the historical moment?

Similar to Plummer, Smith is more concerned with what individuals' narratives tell us about social settings–in particular for Smith, institutions. But her departure from Plummer is her overarching, feminist concern for women's condition of inequality. Here, she is more true to her Marxist background than the Foucauldian leanings of Plummer and Holstein and Gubrium. Smith's ultimate concern is to describe why women experience the social world so differently from–and less favorably than–men. Also a feminist standpoint theorist, I share her overarching concern. I believe sociologists fail to describe the social world when they neglect to include an analysis of its major organizing principles–gender, race, class and sexuality. Hence, Smith's concerns are a useful addition to Holstein and Gubrium's and Plummer's approaches. Yet, Smith's approach is not without its problems.

Smith's reliance on Marx leaves her less well situated to describe the creative agency of actors. It focuses very well on the constraints of institutions but neglects the

possibility for individual negotiation within restrictive institutions. Her description of power continues to focus on institutional forces, implying that group action against institutions is the primary means for true social change. What I demonstrate in later chapters is that, through using interpretive practice (i.e., individual and community talk that produces new interpretations of reality), lesbians attempt to move beyond the discourses that constrain them. Hence, change can begin to happen on the individual level as well as through community action and social movement participation.

Using all these approaches in concert allows me to address agentic actors and oppressive institutions. Using Holstein and Gubrium's approach, I focus on the selves that are available within institutional discourses. Using Smith's and Plummer's approaches, I focus on institutional settings and discourses available during specific historical moments. In this way, I hope to describe lesbian experiences of gender and sexuality and the broader context in which they occur.

Storying Lesbian Selves in a Heteronormative World–Tactics and Methods

In this dissertation, I collect lesbian stories about butch and femme. I do so by interviewing women interacting in lesbian communities about their experiences with butch and femme–positive and negative, personal and observed, participating or avoiding. In short, I listen to what lesbians have to say to each other and to me about butch and femme. I listen to how they produce their interpretation of themselves, with or without butch or femme, and I listen to how butch or femme as institutional discourses shape or constrain their ability to interpret themselves freely. I did not restrict my interviews to lesbians who self-identified as "butch" or "femme" or some form of those. I wanted to hear what a variety of lesbians had to say about butch and femme. Hence, this

dissertation is not the story of butches and femmes. It is the relationship of the ideas of butch and femme to lesbian stories.

Taking the notion about storying selves seriously, my goal is not to find a specific thing about butch or femme or lesbian sexuality or gender. Rather, my goal is to let the members speak for themselves–to let the stories flow.

As a feminist researcher, I am not trying to maintain objectivity (Fonow and Cook 1991). I cannot go as a third person observer into "the field."[6] I live in "the field." I met many of my narrators casually or through work settings before seeking narrators. As a result, many narrators know me, and some of the context of my life and research. I have played softball and basketball with some, had my hair cut by one, gone to bars and concerts and dinners with various, gone to faculty organization meetings with one or two, gone to student organization meetings with many, lived in the same neighborhood as some and crossed paths with most in bookstores or restaurants or on the street or on campus. I lived and worked in the general area of my interviews for four years. Often, my narrators would refer to situations or acquaintances that we may have had in common. Often, they would question me about my identification or relationships or sexual interests. Surely, this is not a situation of objectivity.

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[6] In the classic sense of anthropological study, cultures are studied as foreign objects to the researcher (Abu-Lughod 1991; Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). Interviewing and fieldwork are used to "discover" the existent setting as a natural world in itself. [For examples of these kinds of methods, see Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995); Lofland and Lofland (1995).] Critiquing such an approach, postmodernist ethnographers are more occupied with how the process of doing anthropology itself "writes culture" (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Griffith refers to this as the insider/outsider debate, in which she calls for researchers to more critically examine our positions as both insiders and outsiders (1998). She is not satisfied with understanding the researcher as either insider or outsider, but compels us to understand our positions *both* inside and outside the local.

As an active interviewer, I recognize that during each interview session I have already asked narrators to step outside their everyday lives just by asking them to reflect upon themselves (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Surely my interventions cannot produce a "natural" setting. So the interviews that I undertook were purposefully unstructured, lasting varying lengths of time, with no specific goals except to ask members to talk about themselves and to talk about butch and femme.

Nonetheless, I did have a general set of questions from which I worked to spur members to think about certain general topics, which were garnered from the literature on butch and femme as reviewed in Chapter 1. The general topics began with "what does the term 'butch' or the term 'femme' mean to you?" and proceeded by prompting members to think about historical aspects of butch and femme, their relationship to appearance and/or sexuality, race and class, inner feelings, perceptions about non-lesbians and their conjectures about ideal communities. The questions were designed to prompt members to think about both themselves and their place in lesbian communities. But members were allowed to move the discussion in any direction while I actively interacted to ensure I had a clear understanding of their accounts. If members did not discuss a particular issue, I asked them to think about its relevance. Sometimes, members launched into a new discussion of that relevance. Sometimes, they simply said certain aspects were not that relevant for them. In either case, the prompting was not used to ask them to "get the answer right" so much as to ask them what they thought. How do lesbians perceive the existence or lack of existence of butch and femme in their lives?

I think a brief statement of ethics is necessary. As sponsored research through the University of Florida, I adhered strictly to the rules and guidelines of the Institutional

Review Board to protect the ethics of the project and the confidentiality of the participating members. I adhered strictly to the process for obtaining consent and have been constantly vigilant of the need to maintain confidentiality. As a result, only pseudonyms have been used in this dissertation. No actual identities will be used except for my own.

I pursued multiple types of interviews–focus groups and individual and couples interviews. My interest was to invoke members to speak in a variety of settings where their status as lesbian might be relevant. I wanted to know how members talked in community settings, how they interacted in couples and what they thought of themselves on a most intimate level. Where possible, I completed focus groups and asked those participants to participate in couples interviews followed by individual interviews. However, this method was not strictly adhered to as some members were not available for the entire barrage of interviews. Some members completed all three interviews, some participated in only an individual interview or only the focus group interview or only the couples interview.

In total, I held three focus groups that loosely reflect the major social groups for lesbians in the area; and my partner and I participated in one group meeting in which I was invited to both participate as a member and ask others to reflect about their thoughts. I also held eight couples interviews and twenty-seven individual interviews (of which 2 took place via e-mail).

Demographically, my narrators were relatively diverse with the exception of one dimension–race. The vast majority of my narrators are white (34), two are African American and one is Asian American. The extent of the racial divide in the area surprised

even me. Although I did some exploratory work to include more women of color, I determined that racial communities in the area were largely separate, such that pursuing more communities would, in effect, entail pursuing more than one project. I was concerned that giving short attention to interactional communities that are not my own might risk misunderstanding sub-cultural differences, or worse, imposing white notions on non-white communities. So, I chose to limit my study to the community settings with which I was already familiar. I address race briefly in Chapter 6 but largely leave the issue of racial difference to future studies. Hence, it is important to be clear that this is largely a study of white lesbian culture.

In most other respects, my narrators were largely diverse. They ranged in age from 19 to 71. At least five have children (ranging from small to adult). They come from various class backgrounds–from odd jobs to trades to professions and business owners to being independently wealthy. They come from all over U.S. and include two of international origin. All identified as lesbian, including one lesbian-identified M-to-F transsexual, although some mentioned they might identify as bisexual were it not so difficult to do within lesbian communities. In terms of coming out, they ranged from recently out to more than 40 years as lesbian. With respect to butch and femme, their identities ranged from femme to stone butch to no specific identification, with many permutations and combinations of identities.

A significant division did appear by age. Although I did not organize the focus groups as such, the four group meetings were roughly divided into two groups of women under 30 and two groups of women over 30. I delve into the issue of age difference in Chapter 6.

In addition to my specific interview agenda, I also participated in any number of occasions that augmented my ideas and experiences regarding this subject matter. This I view as fieldwork. I participated in the organizations that I tapped for focus groups and discussed my research and ideas with numerous community members on numerous occasions. I held frequent conversations with many members of the local lesbian community. I was continuously engaged in these discussions with many people–my dissertation committee mentors, local merchants and business women, members of sports leagues (some who are faculty mentors as well), friends, current and former students and students referred to me by other faculty members, social workers, friends of friends, local performers, other graduate students, among others. Indeed, I often found that, after I completed an interview, I would receive invitations to shoot pool, go to lunch, go out to bars, attend future discussion groups, go to house parties and any number of other friendship building activities. In short, I was "in the field" constantly before the data collection actually began and for two years after that.

In sum, the methods used to support this dissertation are an amalgamation of interpretive methods. They were designed to proliferate opportunities to incite talk about butch and femme, not to draw false boundaries around myself as a researcher or the "results" of the research. Indeed, the research continues.

A Note About Me

On a more personal, political note, I prefer this methodological approach and the notion of an agentic storied self because it gives a legitimate and knowledgable voice to lesbians. As a lesbian, I recognize the political importance of allowing lesbian voices to

speak and be heard. Additionally, it is continually important to recognize that lesbian experiences are related to dominant heteronormative discourses, not deviant from or unaffected by those discourses. As a researcher, I appreciate that a sociology of stories understands the storied nature of all sexuality and a notion of selves we live by suggests that all people story selves for themselves. Hence, researchers are not separate from their research site. Researchers also have selves that are storied (in some way, however revisionist or radical) from the available discourses. In the following chapter, I take this premise seriously and provide my own story of self, complete with an interactionist theory of butchness.

CHAPTER 3
"THEY STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY I HATE WEARING DRESSES!": AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RANT ON DRESSES, BOATS, AND BUTCHNESS[7]

> When something is about masculinity, it is not always "about men." I think it is important to drive a wedge in, early and often and if possible conclusively, between the two topics, masculinity and men, whose relation to one another it is so difficult not to presume. (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1995:12)

Taking seriously the notions that selves are narrated in the everyday world and that I, as a researcher and lesbian, live in the world of my narrators, I provide in this chapter my own story of self. The notions "butch" and "femme" and expectations of heteronormativity have been as salient for me in my coming out as lesbian and, indeed, throughout my life, as they have been for any of my narrators. Hence, in relating the stories of my narrators, it seems only fairplay to provide my own story of the way in which I acquired butchness. In doing so, I argue that butchness can be understood as an attempt to display ableness for female-bodied people. This theory of butchness as ableness segues nicely into Chapter 4, in which I note how the talk of my narrators produces the assumption of competence for butchness but not femmeness. In sum, my autoethnography gives context to the assumptions regarding butch and femme that are present in the everyday talk of lesbians. And so, I begin narrating how I understand butchness in my own life story.

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[7] This chapter was previously published in 2002 under the same title in *Cultural Studies ←→ Critical Methodologies*, Volume 2, Number 1, pages 69-92. It is reprinted here with permission from Sage Publications.

This is not me. Of course, my face is pictured but it is not me. I look nice, don't I?

That's what I have heard often, "You look so pretty in this picture!" I don't see beauty in this picture. I see the make-up my sister applied, the way she styled my hair, the dress my parents bought, the daughter and granddaughter that every girl is supposed to be, and the wife that every woman is supposed to become. What is not pictured is me. In this picture, I am a prop in the collective fantasy of The American Dream (Butler 1993; de Lauretis 1994). In this picture, I exemplify and reify the "natural" morality of heterosexuality, contractual marriage and capitalistic success. It is a comfortable fantasy, but it is no more "natural" than the lipstick and hairspray that I am wearing. It was never me. I looked like that exactly one day in my life. I wasn't too happy about it then, but what choice does a girl have?

This is me. I look good in a tux, don't I? Rarely have I heard that I could look handsome.

Tuxedos also produce a fantasy–an alternative dream, if you will–but it's a queer one–harder to read, not as comfortable. The alternative fantasy makes it harder to imagine "daughter," "sister," "girl"–and "wife" has a very different meaning than it did before. This picture is closer to the me I see. It is closer to the fantasy I want to construct. The Sara that I see in my mind doesn't wear dresses. She sails, drinks beer, studies hard, dances, drives a truck, jokes with friends, among other things. I don't wear dresses because a simple dress has the power to hide all those other parts of me.

It is through an understanding of my relationship to dresses, boats, and butchness that I interpret the way I have negotiated a place in the world. I am a self-proclaimed butch lesbian and I am continually mystified by the ways in which gender and sexuality

intersect and are constructed for people with non-standard gender presentations.[8] This chapter is an invitation into the images of my experiences that provide an analytic for the existence of butchness.

I offer my story (Denzin 1992) not because I see myself as a particular exemplar of lesbianism or even of femaleness. Quite the contrary, what is most useful about my experiences is that they are wholey unremarkable. My life is as everyday and commonplace as anyone's. As an autoethnography, the story is not so much about me as it is about the experience of gender and sexuality in late 20th century America. And, although it is a life narrative about a lesbian, I offer it as potentially informative to anyone who has acquired a Westernized, gendered self and critically reflects on them.

I also write by way of offering a theory of gendered selves. Specifically, I argue that butchness in lesbians is a response to cultural notions about the appropriateness of ableness for female-bodied people. Butchness is a practice in a sexist, heterosexist culture that engages female-bodied people in the expression of ableness. This may not be the

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[8] In claiming my butchness as felt experience, I am going out on a limb politically. There is a danger that this paper will be read as an assertion that my experiences may be indicative of the experiences of all butches. That is not my intention. I recognize that many other butches may not see me as butch or "butch enough" to represent butchness for various reasons including some of the following. I do not work a job that requires physical labor. I do not "pack" (the practice of wearing a harness and carrying a dildo in one's pants in declaration of one's right to sexual agency and one's readiness to engage in sexual interaction with a fem). I recognize myself as a woman by identifying as a "butch lesbian" which renders me not qualified by some standards to represent stonebutchness or transgender butchness. But it is not my intention to represent all forms of butchness in this paper. I am only hoping to use my felt experiences to open new theoretical directions. I should note that the "felt experiences" to which I refer are those of a white, working-class butch currently living and working in a middle-class, academic setting. Butch and fem may have different meanings to lesbians of color and I do not intend to represent that experience. It is my opinion that the experiences of people of color are significantly underrepresented in gay and lesbian studies and that more work needs to be done on and by lesbians of color.

only experience or interpretation of butchness. But it is, I think, an original one and one that speaks, not only about butches, but about culture, discourse, and a resistance that gives rise to such a possibility. In theorizing the personal, I provide a frame of reference for renewing a sense of how one can construct sexuality.

Always at issue is how to voice an argument. At 35 years old, I have been in graduate school studying sociology for six years, concentrating my academic interests on butch and femme in lesbian communities. Having read volumes of literature on butch and femme, I have come away feeling that academic "texts" do not reflect some of my lived experience. Often informing disciplines rather than lesbians, they do not reflect the everyday, material knowledge that I feel regarding butchness.[9] As a result, I choose to put myself in the text (literally) by offering an autoethnography. I model this work after the sociological contributions of Carolyn Ellis (1991a; 1991b; 1993; 1997; and 1998). Ellis uses autoethnography to "find her voice, speak from her body, not from the body of the paper (Ellis 1997:135)."

In this chapter, I speak through the voice of my embodied experiences as well as through the voice of a gender theorist and sociologist. It is both personal and theoretical, interweaving lived experience with how that experience, writ large, both is and can be represented as being. Grounding this in personal experience, I present "scenes" from my history (as I interpret them now, of course) and organize them to narrate for the reader the story of gender and sexuality as I organize it for myself. In doing so, I attempt to show in

[9] Two notable exceptions to this critique are Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis (1993), which provides an oral history of the 1950s era lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, and Munt (1998), which has collected several autoethnographic style texts by a variety of authors. I hope this piece adds to the work that these two volumes provide.

the next two sections how I commonly understand the notions of "dresses" and "boats" as metaphors for requisite femininity and able-ness respectively. Following this, I use butchness as a resource to respond, both personally and theoretically, to a culture that sees the female body as less competent than the male body. In the process, butchness becomes an embodied display that critiques the preposterous notion that masculinity is essential to any-body.

Dresses

Weddings

[*Scene:* It is 1996. Sitting around the dinner table at my parents' house, my mother, my partner, and I are discussing an upcoming wedding of a close, female friend. She had asked me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding and I found myself completely frustrated over the lack of available choices with which that request left me. It was not the first wedding in which I had been asked to be a bridesmaid from this close set of friends. All of my friends from high school and college would be there and were well aware of my life-long aversion to wearing dresses. It was a dilemma that I have always hated: how to participate fully in a very important, very public day of a good friend without committing the cardinal sin against my hard-won construction of self–feminizing to suit normative gender imperatives. My partner and I had come home for the weekend to visit my parents and our friends and take a two-day respite from the rigors of grad school. We are catching Mom up on the latest news.]

"I have to wear another goddamn dress," I ranted at no one in particular, as my partner nodded in agreement with my felt frustration. "Terri promised when we were at Wendy's wedding that, when she got married, I could wear a tux. And now she is

reneging."

"Oh, you know she can't really let you wear a tux to her wedding," my mom replied.

"I know," I replied. "It's not just her wedding. It's her mom's wedding too. I just can't stand that I have to wear a dress. And everyone will be there–staring," I said, sulking.

"Oh, nobody will be staring," my mom tried to console me.

"YES, THEY WILL. YOU KNOW THEY WILL. Everyone knows how much I hate dresses and you know they will be watching me and laughing at how silly I look," I replied, surprising myself and my mom with more anger than I expected to express. I got up and left the table frustrated and shaking with anger. "Goddammit," I thought to myself, "I'm 30 years old and they still don't understand why I hate wearing dresses."

For many years I have been aware that I have one of two choices on these occasions: (1) I can be in the wedding as a bridesmaid, choking up my own pride and self respect and symbolically signifying the importance of my close friendship with someone who is very important to me, or (2) I can simply attend the wedding as a guest, honoring my own convictions about distasteful, heterosexualizing, sexist rituals and my choice of personal presentation. Of course, this second choice calls into question the importance of my friendship with the bride. After all, if I really cared about her as a close friend, wouldn't I just buck up and wear the dress?

T-shirts

[*Scene:* We are in the backyard of a farm in rural, central Indiana on which I live with my mom, dad and sister, Cindy. Open fields of clover wave in the wind on a warm summer day. Our house is on a bend in the road with neighbors on one side and another family at the end of our long, gravel driveway. Behind our house are several acres of

woods with trees to climb and a creek with a rock bridge. If you are good at jumping from rock to rock, you might even keep your feet from getting wet. It is a fantasyland for kids with endless possibilities of forts and wilderness survival and all kinds of adventure. When the days get hotter than 80 degrees (Farenheit), we get to go barefooted. There are several neighbor kids that Cindy and I play with. We are behind the house right now playing with Danny. It's 1971, the first year that I know what a year is. I'm 5 years old.]

"Sara come here," Mom yelled from the house.

"What?" I answered as I walked toward the back door.

"Come over here and put this t-shirt on."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"But it's hot. I don't want to wear a t-shirt."

"It's not that hot. Put this on. You should be wearing a shirt."

"But I don't want to. Why do I have to?"

"Because you shouldn't be running around without a shirt on anymore."

"Why not? Danny doesn't have to wear a t-shirt. Dad doesn't have to wear a t-shirt. Why do I have to?"

"Because girls need to wear t-shirts."

"Why? I don't want to wear a shirt."

"Don't argue. Put this on."

I, of course, did what Mom said. You have to do what Mom says. But I spent the rest of the afternoon arguing with Mom's logic in my mind. "But, Mom. . . I don't understand. That doesn't make any sense. It's not fair. I don't want to wear a shirt. Why

should I have to wear a shirt? What does being a girl have anything to do with wearing a t-shirt?" It was so frustrating and illogical. Why did I get stuck being hot just because I was a girl? It just doesn't make any sense.

Star Trek

[*Scene:* I am 6 years old and in first grade. Mom and I are in my bedroom as I'm dressing for school. Mom and I are having an earnest chat as she sits at the foot of my twin bed with the railing on one side. I stand amid the toys strewn around the floor.]

"Can't you just wear a dress to school once in a while?" Mom practically pleaded.

Mom finally gave her last offer, "Ok. I'll make you a deal. You only have to wear a dress one day a week."

"What kind of deal is that?" I thought to myself. "What's in it for me? I thought a deal was where both folks got something out of it." "But I don't want to wear a dress, ever," I told her.

Poor Mom. I was never compliant on this issue. She didn't seem to understand that you can't play at recess with a dress on. Besides, lately we had been playing Star Trek a lot. It was Darren's idea because he liked it so much and he knew all the characters. He wanted to be Mr. Spock so I got to be Captain Kirk. You have to be able to run up and over mounds of dirt and dive behind them if you are going to play Star Trek– especially if you are going to be Captain Kirk. You can't be wearing a dress to do that. Your underwear would show. I got stuck wearing a dress that day but our "deal" fell through. My persistence won out. I didn't wear dresses that year. In fact, I didn't wear a dress again until seventh grade when I was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society. You practically have to wear a dress for something like that. It's formal. At any

rate, that's my record so far–six years without wearing a dress. To this very day I'm still working on it. (Damn weddings!) I'm going to break that record in about four more years.

Marching Band

[*Scene*: It's 1982. I am 16 and a sophomore in high school. We had long since moved from Indiana to South Florida where my Dad's job had relocated. In high school, marching band would become my passion–sort of like a religion. I played trumpet. It was very serious. We had to have the halftime show polished. I wanted a leadership role. I wanted my voice to count and I wanted responsibility. But there were few officer positions available to sophomores. You could be a librarian or a quartermaster. Librarians were primarily assigned to file the sheet music and keep track of who had it checked out. Quartermasters loaded instruments on buses when we went on trips. Located in the center of an auditorium-style practice room, I am standing on the podium in front of 100 students giving my electoral address for the position of Quartermaster. Why would anyone want to file sheet music?]

"I have worked hard for this band and I'm prepared to work harder. I'll work hard to keep the instruments in order and pack them carefully on the busses. I'll show up early for games and stay late to pack up. I'll represent anyone's concerns in officer meetings and communicate issues to the other officers and to Mr. Kidd. I want this job and I'll work hard at it. And if anyone doesn't think I can lift a sousaphone, say so right now and I'll prove it to you once and for all. I have lifted them before and I can lift one now. Please vote for me for Quartermaster."

[I had been honing my feminist oration skills since seventh grade. It is now later in the same year. Several officers are standing around the band room chatting while

waiting for an officer meeting to begin. One of the librarians is talking to me while others are looking on.]

"Sara you should wear just a little bit of mascara. You have such pretty eyes. You would look so much nicer with just a little bit of makeup," Diana commented completely unprovoked.

"Won't that run when I sweat?" I replied.

"Well, try not to do things that make you sweat."

"Uh–Huh!" I chuckled as I walked away.

How does one respond to that? Boy, did she have me pegged wrong. I worked hard as Quartermaster that year. The following year I would be 1st Lieutenant and my senior year I would be Band Captain–the highest officer that was not a drum major. I did sweat quite a lot but my makeup never ran. I always remember band very fondly. I was always glad that I had been an officer. I enjoyed having my opinion heard.

"You're A Young Lady."

[*Scene*: It's 1986. I'm 20 and looking for the dreaded summer job between sophomore and junior years in college. I needed to save big cash that year because I intended to spend the next summer studying in Innsbruck, Austria. My parents had agreed to pay the summer tuition since the credits counted toward my degree but I had to earn my round-trip airfare, Eurail pass and spending money for nine weeks. I needed a job that paid real money, no more $3.35 an hour. The valet parking jobs for private clubs on the beach were long since gone. I didn't have any connections at major companies. I looked through the want ads for decent jobs and the pickings were slim. They all entailed manual labor but that was fine with me. I needed money. I was turned away for several jobs over the phone. I answered two ads in person. I'm standing at the reception desk of a

local, family-owned firm that offered $7.50 an hour for laying Italian tile. Behind the reception desk is an elderly woman who appears to be a grandmotherly-figure helping out with some office work]

"May I have an application, please," I asked.

"What job are you applying for?" she seemed confused.

"There was an ad in the paper for someone to lay tile. I wanted to apply."

"You can't apply for that job. You're a young lady," she replied almost shocked.

"Can I at least fill out an application?" I asked, thinking that someone else would do the actual screening for the job.

"We only take applications from men for that job," she answered firmly.

There was nothing else that I could say. "They don't have a clue whether I can do that job," I thought to myself as I turned and left. "I know that's illegal and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. Goddammit!"

[I left that office quietly seething. It was pointless to argue. The next day I met with the owner of a lawn maintenance company, expecting the same reception. We sat in cab of his aging Toyota pick up in front of the parking lot of the convenience store where his work crew took lunch break. He looked me up and down to determine my physical abilities.]

"Do you think you can do the work?" he asked.

"I'll damn sure give it a try," I told him.

"Well," he said. "I'm not sexist. I'll let you try it. If you can't do it, just let me know. I'll pay you and we can part company."

I started the next day and worked from 8:00 am to 4:30pm (with half an hour for lunch) from early May to early August. As it turned out, he was only speaking for himself when he said he wasn't sexist. Everyone else on the crew was overtly sexist. Because the crew hated me for being female, I got to pull weeds all day long. I took shit from them EVERY DAY. They said I slowed them down. They would supposedly have to do more work to make up for my presence. I found out later that I only slowed down their crack smoking. While I was pulling weeds, the crew boss would send one worker to crack town to buy some stuff for them. When he returned, they would all get high in the backyard of one of the houses we were working on. In the mean time, I was cutting 100 two-foot high ball bushes by hand or laying a truckload of mulch or pulling weeds for 11 houses in a row. I have never been in so much pain. I hated it. The muscles in my fingers swelled so that my rings didn't fit until after the summer was over. I found out about the crack smoking in the middle of the summer when the crew boss approached me in the middle of a particularly large lawn to ask if I thought I could ride the mower. I was shocked. What a stupid question. I had been driving the dump truck to haul the trash. What made him think I couldn't drive a riding lawn mower? As it turns out, this new offer was only extended because he was so high on crack that he was afraid he would drive the mower into the lake. Apparently, the rest of the crew was just as high. Otherwise, riding the mower would have been reserved for the "obviously more qualified" men. A few years later my Dad told me he never understood why I stayed with that job. He said he had never seen anyone work so hard. He said I looked "pitiful." I couldn't quit that job. I wasn't about to. They would have been right. It would have been too much *for a girl*. It wasn't worth the money.

Funerals

[*Scene*: I am inside the living room of my grandparents house in north central Indiana. It's 1987. I'm 21. It is the day of Grandpa's funeral and the whole family has just returned to Grandma and Grandpa's house after the service. Grandma is sitting in her chair blowing her nose and wiping the hours' old tears from her water-weary eyes. It has been a difficult day for everyone and I'm exhausted by 3pm. One of my cousins is sitting on the couch quietly. I just finished changing into comfortable clothes and collapsing into an easy chair across the room. The living room is absolutely still. No one is quite sure what to do or say. Other cousins, aunts and uncles are moving up and down the stairway in the process of changing clothes also.]

"You look better now," Grandma says to me as she blows her nose again. She has been bursting into tears at odd intervals all day and it's been so difficult to know what to say or do primarily because there is nothing that can be said or done.

"What do you mean?" I asked surprised by her comment.

"Wearing jeans." She pauses to blow her nose and catch her breath. "You look more like yourself."

"I bought the suit just before I came up for the funeral," I said sniffling. "Mom suggested I buy one since I will need one for interviewing soon." It seemed necessary to buy a business suit with jacket and skirt to use for interviews after graduation next year.

"Well, it's a fine suit but I like you better in jeans."

"Me too." My eyes began to tear again–for Grandpa and for me.

After all those years of her and Mom tag teaming me about the merits of dresses, she finally admitted they just don't fit me. It was the best gift Grandma ever gave me. She understood. Grandma died five years later. I wore pants to her funeral.

As you can see, wearing dresses has never been a picnic for me. I associate them with the expectation that my female body can't do [insert any physical task]. Dresses ARE femininity to me and I don't understand why everyone seems so hell bent on expecting my participation in what I perceive as my own disabling. For me, the appearance of femininity signals the appearance of disability. However, as I will discuss later, dresses are not perceived as disabling by all women (my sister in particular), which establishes a particular complexity to interaction. Before addressing this complexity, I address my response to requisite femininity.

Boats

Waterskiing

[*Scene*: It is 1984. I am 18. We are in the middle of the Intracoastal Waterway somewhere between Palm Beach Inlet and Jupiter Inlet on my friends' boat. It is summer in south Florida and the sun is beating down. It is 95 degrees with 98% humidity and the water temperature feels like bath water. Mike has just finished jumping wakes on the hydroslide. We've all been rating his falls–1 is letting go of the ski rope, 10 is drawing blood. He got about an 8 and decided it was someone else's turn. Bill already took a turn and Thomas is driving the boat.]

"Hey, Sara. Your turn," Thomas calls out.

"Cool. I'll take a turn," I reply as I lean over the gunwhale to tend to the ski rope lest it get caught in the prop.

"Do you want skis or the hydroslide?" Bill asks. He stands poised to hand me the skis if I would prefer them to the board Mike has in the water.

"Hydroslide," I replied, "but you can hand me a beer though."

Bill shoots me a grin as he hands me a beer. I slip it in my ski vest. "Shit, that's cold." I grin back at him.

Mike climbs in the boat as I jump over the side, beer and all. I kick over to the board as Thomas motors the boat ahead to take the slack out of the ski rope.

"Bonzai!" I yell as Thomas hits the throttle. As the ski rope yanks me out of the water, I pull the board under my knees and velcro the strap around my legs. In less than 10 seconds after the boat pulls me out of the water, I've opened the beer and commence to drinking it while skiing. After about 30 seconds the air has sucked out 1/3 of the beer, I have consumed the rest and I take my shot at wake jumping. How spectacular will my falls be?

Bill reaches in the cooler for a handful of ice and yells, "Duck, S," as he begins to hurl ice cubes in my direction.

Ok, it's kind of silly and infantile but it was A LOT of fun. Somewhere there is a picture of me just before I am about to take off on the hydroslide smiling about as big as my face will smile. I've never looked quite so healthy in any wedding picture. In 1992, Thomas, Ray and I took an outboard motor repair course. In 1993, Thomas and I got our commercial captains licenses. (It was a 2-for-1 at Sea School.) They are all the happiest of memories.

"You've Never Done A Day's Work."

[*Scene*: It is May 1983. I am just about to finish my junior year in high school. I need a summer job. I've just parked in front of the local boat supply store which has a help-wanted sign displayed in the front window.]

"I saw the sign in the window about help wanted. I am looking for a job," I say to the man behind the cash register.

A very salty-looking, tanned old guy laughed out loud. "You want a job?" he chuckled.

"Yes," I replied.

"Are you qualified?" he asked. "Let me see your hands."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Let me see your hands," he said. "I'll tell you if you are qualified," he laughed.

Sensing where this was going, I tentatively opened my hands to let him see my palms.

"See, you've never done a days' work," he pronounced.

"Nevermind," I said and left quickly, thinking to myself, "What the fuck do you expect, asshole." (I had already learned how to talk like a sailor.) "I'm a high school student, idiot. What do you think my hands will look like? Besides, what do your hands have to look like to sell boat bumpers and coolers over a sales counter?"

It was clear to me that he had seen a young, female person and concluded right there that I couldn't be qualified. He didn't care that I knew a bow from a stern, had 2 years experience operating a cash register and an SAT score higher than he could count. He wasn't willing to teach me anything.

"It's Not My Boat; You Need To Be Talking To Her."

[*Scene*: It is 1993. I am 27. Mike and I are standing in a boat store in the Florida Keys looking for a boat part. At 25, I bought my first sailboat. She's beautiful–Tatiana, an O'Day 25'centerboard sloop–red. I had been docking the boat behind Mike's apartment in the Florida Keys and we sailed and worked on the boat together often during

that time. Mike and I are debating whether any of the parts on the shelf will work for the job at hand. A store employee approaches us to help.]

"May I help y'all find something?" the store employee asked.

"I need a replacement for this water strainer gasket," I said as I handed him the worn-out part.

He looked directly at Mike and asked, "Did you get this off the boat you're fixing?"

"Yeah," Mike said tentatively and looking in my direction.

"I need exactly the same piece," I jumped in.

"Do you know the size of the part?" he directed again at Mike.

Mike looked him right in the face and said, "It's not my boat and it's not my money. You need to be talking to her."

The salesman was startled for a minute but then continued his line of questioning directed quite carefully at me this time, "Uh, well, do you know what size you need?"

It was clear to all of us that he had made the standard faux pas. He assumed a boat owner must be male.

San Francisco

[*Scene*: We are aboard a 28-foot sailboat on the San Francisco Bay. It is May. My partner and I are on vacation with my ex-partner and her new partner. (I know. I know. Ellen has a joke about this. That must be why it's funny.) We've rented a sailboat for the afternoon from a marina in Sausalito. After displaying my captain's license to the dockmaster and plucking down a credit card for the $1,000 deposit on the boat, I asked the dockmaster for some local knowledge of the bay area and a run down of the specific

mechanics of the boat we had rented. He gave me a demeaning quiz on sailing knowledge and very little else and we were off.]

"Wow, look how high it is," Dianne said as she stares 150 feet overhead. Kelly is busy taking pictures of each of us and the surrounding bay and landscape.

"I can't believe we are sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge," said my partner in awe at its enormity.

"A toast," I offer, "to sailing and friends and San Francisco." We all raise our wine glasses, sip and sit quietly for a moment.

"Shit yeah!" is the most appropriate thing I can think to say.

"Most Men Couldn't Even Put A Boat In That Slip That Well."

[*Scene*: We are at Lake Park Marina a few years after I purchased Tatiana. I just finished sailing with my Mom and sister, both of whom are relatively inexperienced on boats. They never had the interest in boats that I did and, hence, never learned what one does when one is approaching or leaving a dock. We were done with our day of sailing and I had just maneuvered the boat back into its slip. This was a municipal marina with boats tightly packed in so docking is always tricky. But I am used to it and I steered the boat into the slip pretty handily, backed down on the engine and grabbed the dock lines. No sooner had we landed but a gentleman walked over to the slip.]

"I hope you don't take this wrong but that was a pretty fine docking job. Most men couldn't even put a boat in that slip that well."

"It's not my first day on the job," I said flashing him a half smile, bowing up my chest and fanning my tail feathers as I had seen men do for each other from time to time.

"Well it was a pretty damn fine job," he repeated and kept muttering about something until he had clearly overstayed his welcome. "Well, have a nice day," he said and left.

I purposefully had let him dangle uncomfortably. I know he was only trying to be nice but the implication of his "compliment" kept bothering me. The implication was that most women couldn't be expected to dock a boat, let alone well. And, most men should be expected to dock a boat better than most women. This has always perplexed me. I have two hands and two legs. What should impede me from being able to sail a boat? It's as if there is something missing from female bodies that makes them less capable. This baffles me because I have never seen a sailing maneuver in which a penis is actually utilized to pilot the boat.

A Well-Trained Women's Crew

[*Scene*: It is April 1995. I am standing on the back porch of a friend's apartment with several friends gathered for our standard Friday evening beer fest. The humidity is high but the breeze moderates the heat. I am standing with several mostly male friends exchanging jokes and stories. Someone brought up the issue of the America3 Women's Team, the first women's crew to compete for the America's Cup. They were to begin racing in a few weeks.]

A friend and long-time sailor belted out, "A well-trained men's crew will beat a well-trained women's crew every time."

"What?" I half shouted.

"I said a well-trained men's crew will beat a well-trained women's crew every time," he repeated.

I stood silently unable to reply for a moment, then just walked off toward the cooler to grab another beer.

Why were *all* men supposed to be better than *all* women? What is it about sailing–a sport that requires technology in the vessel and skill of handling, but not purely muscle–that preempted women's successful competition? He clearly believes that no matter what women do, men are better. (See Crawley 1998 for my reply.)

Boats for me are freedom. They are travel and adventure and motion. I have this odd love of motion. I never get seasick. I love the feeling of skimming across the water in a power boat on a plane at ¾ speed with my hair blown back so far the sun is burning my scalp line; or sailing on a close reach with 15 knots of wind and the boat healed over 25 degrees; or simply feeling the waves lift my torso out of the water as I dangle from the bow rail of a boat adrift, rising and falling with the waves. I'm not sure where this love of the water came from. It has an interesting parallel to my sexuality. Neither of my parents are boaters. I'm not sure how I got interested, although I can remember wanting a boat since I was about 11 or 12.

One of the things I have learned most strikingly from my boating experiences is ableness–my own ableness and the lack of ableness taught to or perceived of female-bodied persons. I have learned that I begin each new task–fixing the rigging, changing the packing on the prop shaft, finding and fixing an oil leak–with a measure of self-doubt. Female-bodied people learn to attempt physical tasks with a self-imposed understanding

that I will try but it is likely that "I cannot."[10] Each time I attack something new, I must go through the process of proving *to myself* that I am able. And so, I have sailed boats, built decks, repaired engines, ridden my bike 280 miles in 3 days, traveled Europe alone among other adventures. My point is that *I have had to learn* that I am able. I have had to teach myself that my body is not the frail, physically useless thing that was implied by cultural messages all around me. The teaching of ableness to myself has come in slow, painful experimenting with things that I was told I could not do. I had *to perform* ableness to myself to teach myself that the cultural messages were wrong. Along the way, I started receiving different social messages about what those performances of ableness meant in terms of sexuality.

Butchness

At 27, I finally came out as a lesbian. I say finally because I had had a relationship with a woman 4 years earlier but was reluctant to think about "what that all means." I was now beginning a relationship with another woman and was beginning to recognize that it was becoming a pattern. From that point forward, self-acceptance came relatively easily to me, fortunately. But coming out after having already formed one's adult identity causes one to rethink all kinds of things. History is reconfigured ("Oh, now that makes sense.") and all those lurking interests become possible, and sensible. Now there seems to be no reason to feminize for anyone.

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[10] I use the term female-bodied here very purposefully. As Young (1980) describes through her notion of "inhibited intentionality (146)," all people who possess female bodies, are understood to be "women" and are taught to restrict their body usage such that they understand their capabilities more in terms of "I cannot" rather than "I can." Hence, part of becoming a woman entails understanding one's (female) body as incapable.

Dressing Down Today?

[*Scene*: I had been working for a major insurance-related corporation for four years. It's 8:45am inside a large corporate workspace with cubicles forming a maze throughout the otherwise open floor. I have just arrived at work and am heading toward the cafeteria for my morning diet coke. Walking down the hall amid several other professionally dressed worker bees, I approach a male co-worker and friend who is dressed in a man's suit minus the jacket. I am wearing a pair of linen pants and silk shirt. I too had already shed my jacket.]

"Good morning, Mark," I start.

"Well not exactly good but hi yourself," he replied with usual heavy sarcasm. (Mark's glass was usually half empty.) "Dressed down today, I see," he continues.

"Huh?" I responded with morning grogginess.

"The pants. Are you trying to get fired?" He was joking about losing my job but completely serious about implying I was dressed casually.

"Wait, I'm wearing the same thing as you," I responded a bit dumbfounded.

"Figures you would want to dress like a man," he quipped with his signature gay male cattiness.

"Good morning, Mark!" I pronounced as I rounded the door to the cafeteria leaving this unwanted encounter behind.

One has to feminize to look "professional." Talk about your double binds (Frye 1983). This realization made the problem of whether to participate in weddings infinitely more difficult. My response to my colleagues was to stop wearing skirts entirely. At 29, I left the corporate world for an MA program in my home town. At 31, I entered a Ph.D. program at the University of Florida and gave away my last "professional" skirt. (I had

long since stopped wearing them but had kept them in the closet, just in case.) At 33, I participated in the last wedding in which I will ever wear a dress. I only have 4 more years to break the record I set from first grade to seventh grade.

At 32, I began writing this chapter. In writing this chapter, it became clear to me that I had been butch much longer than I had been lesbian. I didn't identify it as butchness but I knew I was different. It wasn't until later that I learned to call my gender struggle *butchness.* The term was a resource that had not been available to me earlier (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). But I still refused makeup and dresses and any of the trappings of femininity because they stifled me.

For me, butchness wasn't primarily about sexuality or even about lesbianism. (However, my non-standard gender presentation has always caused others to question my sexual orientation even before I became aware of my sexual interests. Gender and sexuality discourses are so entwined that non-normative gender always calls sexuality into question.) But I didn't know to call it butchness until I came out as lesbian. I do not wish to suggest that butchness is not itself about sexuality. Certainly butchness has been about sexuality historically and it continues to be in many ways, and it may be in ways for other people that it has not always been for me.

For me, butchness has always been about having to prove that I can do whatever I want to do–that my female body is not a restriction. For me, *butchness is the display of ableness.* But the display is not just for everyone else, whether male or female. It is a display of ableness *for me too.* In many ways, I have come to believe that they might be right. The discourse about females' lack of ableness comes from so many instructors that it is hard to reject. As Bartky (1990) outlines, in this panoptical culture, femininity is not

a trait that some women elect. It is a social control mechanism that is transcribed on the female body by ever-judging eyes. Ever-present surveillance represses difference. The judgment comes from everywhere. Until, eventually it comes from inside in the form of self-doubt and self-judgment. In many ways, I have come to believe I might not be able.

The issue is not whether butchness is about gender OR sexuality, but rather that butchness *happens* at the particular intersection of gender and sexuality for lesbians interacting within a sexist, heterosexist culture. Butches are not "women" who want to be "men." They are female-bodied persons who wish to gain social access to doing things that traditionally only males have been allowed to do (e.g., work on engines, work in construction, have their input taken as legitimate and authoritative). They wish to resist the regulatory discourses-in-practice (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) of "women" as passive and incapable, and desirous of and dependent on "men." To achieve that, butches participate in those performances that the gatekeepers of those spaces–men–see as granting legitimacy to the actor because it is those performances that give gatekeepers the *perception* that one is able to do that job or activity. Weston (1990) writes, "In the face of a weight of evidence indicating that a woman has the knowledge, skill, and experience to do a job, employers and coworkers still have difficulty believing that she will be *able* to produce (137, emphasis in original)." Hence, women are often disallowed access to certain activities, especially jobs, because men *perceive* them as incapable (see also Crawley 1998). One response to this conundrum for female-bodied people is to take on the persona of ableness–butchness.

The conundrum goes something like this. Unless one performs a job, such as, construction worker well, one may not be granted access to doing that job–and displaying

any sort of quality that is seen as "feminine" (which is always, already applied to female-bodied people) is not permissible in that performance. I want to be clear here that I am not referring to the physical accomplishment of the activity (i.e., driving a nail into a piece of wood or learning to sail a boat) which may be, in fact, quite simple to master. I am referring to the accomplishment of the accepted style of performing the task such that the male gatekeepers of a setting perceive the task is done "well," that is, to the related discursive and performative practice of masculinity (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Hence, butches have an interest in doing "masculinity" only to the extent that it performs "construction worker" well. That is, they want to be seen as *able*. This is not the performance of "man" but the performance of "construction worker" which is often conflated with "man" since males are often the only people granted access to the job.

To perform "construction worker" or any other male-only activity requires years of practice, potentially a life time. And, this practice is not performed only to the external audience but often must be performed to self as well, since part of the audience that must perceive the task to be done "well" is me. *I must learn to convince myself that I perform the task "well."*

This is how butchness is produced. Seeing or being a "woman" who performs "masculinity" well is not a viable option in our regulatory regime (Butler 1993). She cannot be "woman" if she performs "man" well and she cannot be "man" without the appropriate "sex" so she must be something else–"butch." The reiteration of "masculine" femaleness as "butch" to self and by others continually constructs that space where females can accomplish certain tasks "well" and *constructs those identities of butchness*

for butches. Once produced as a non-standard narrative resource, butchness now becomes available for future use among lesbians in local culture.[11]

In her book, *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith Halberstam writes:

> When gender-ambiguous children are constantly challenged about their gender identity, the chain of misrecognitions can actually produce a new recognition: in other words, to be constantly mistaken for a boy, for many tomboys, can contribute to the production of masculine identity. It was not until my midtwenties that I finally found a word for my particular gender configuration: butch. (19)

Here she asserts that new, recognizable categories can be produced by the consistent performance of coherent categories by the "wrong" people (i.e., women doing masculinity). But one who engages in new category production may not know how to understand the experience until it is given a name and communal context. (i.e., "Oh, I'm like them and they call it…") In this instance, a new narrative resource is produced–butchness. [12]

I do not believe that all females who engage in butchness are necessarily aware of the pursuit of "masculinity" as access or ableness. But the need for repetition is clear. It is this repetition that convinces butches that they are "essentially or naturally masculine."[13] Thus, it is not that butches are born masculine but that they have been pursuing the activities labeled as masculine for a long time. Since gender discourses categorize the activity as masculine and masculinity must be performed well to participate in the activity, butches view themselves as many others likely have–able as a masculine person.

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[11] Indeed, this paper also participates in constructing and producing the meaning of butchness by defining it as ableness.

[12] Halberstam also argues that female masculinity has always contributed to the production of masculinities although if has largely gone unrecognized. This concept is very compelling and deserves greater theoretical attention although I do not pursue it in this paper.

The interest in and pursuit of the activity becomes the defining feature to both the individual and to observers that the butch is "naturally" masculine. Of course, it comes to feel "natural" because it is so constantly practiced.

Let me return briefly to the personal theme running through this chapter. *This is precisely why I hate wearing dresses.* In my experience, the path to constructing myself as an able person who can accomplish many tasks in which a person of my "sex" is not supposed to engage has been long, difficult, and sometimes painful. And, given the regulatory expectations of femininity that I have had to side step, the path has encompassed my everyday existence since my earliest memories of asking my mom to explain to me why I had to wear a t-shirt to play outside. Since those early understandings of femininity as restrictive and disabling, I have engaged in a constant battle against expectations to build my self as not feminine, not unable but able, and not constrained by my female body. At 35, the feminizing expectation that I have no choice but to wear a dress in certain settings feels like a direct attack on the self that I have been building publicly and inwardly for years. Dismissals that it should be "no big deal" for me to do so add immeasurable insult to injury.

Wearing butch style is an announcement and co-optation of personal power. I feel this power of resistance when I cut my hair razor short and wear ties, pants that bag around my waist, thick leather belts, and "men's" underwear. This is a way that I demonstrate to myself and others that I will not be feminized by expectations for clothing and appearance. This is a way that I tell lesbians whom I do not know that I am one of them and heterosexuals whom I do not know that I am not one of them. This is the way

[13] This is effectively Butler's argument in *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

that I announce to the world that I hate wearing dresses and I illustrate to them all how silly I would look in them. This is the way I announce to others and myself that, if "masculinity" is ableness, then I am as able and capable of doing "masculinity" "well" as anyone.

Presenting myself as an out, butch dyke has exacted a change in the behavior of others. Men now give me the respectful nod reserved only for peers. Women regularly flash me the deferential, Daddy's-little-girl smile. Car parts dealers now speak directly to me even when Mom is the one trying to get her car fixed. People seem to react to the performance of masculinity, not the actual ableness. Yes, I can sail a boat and make a majority of repairs on my own boat. No, I haven't a clue why some switches make car engines overheat. In this, I have never been trained. But whenever I have been called upon (or not) to address a particular situation, my abilities and knowledge have been largely irrelevant in how others have treated me. Only the performance of masculinity has changed others' reactions to my input. Performing masculinity seems to compel respect. It's not that I wish to co-opt hegemonic masculinity at the expense of women. But I do want the respect that is accorded only to men. I want it for me and I want it for other women too.[14]

[14] I want to be clear to recognize that females wearing masculinity also face potential pitfalls. In addition to respectful treatment, I have also received extremely disrespectful treatment, including epithets hurled out of car windows, strangers unabashedly staring, and multitudes of women virtually running out of public restrooms. I am constantly aware that my appearance may incite discomfort that could result in extreme physical violence.

As for sexuality, I do not wish to diminish its importance. But it has not been a large component of butchness for me. Nonetheless, identity invades the bedroom. In my experience, butchness is not restricted to enacting a stereotypical heterosexual, male sexual role in a lesbian couple. Indeed, through many years of discussing sexuality with many lesbians, I have never heard any lesbian express an interest in "being the man" sexually or in looking for a partner who will assume that role. Although much literature describes some forms of butchness as the sexual initiator (Hollibaugh and Moraga 1981; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestle 1992), I have never felt compelled to engage that form of sexuality. (Nonetheless, I do support any female's interest in developing sexual agency including some butches' interest in pursuing aggressive sexual subjectivity.) In my experience, butch sexuality can be interpreted in many ways. Freeing myself from the culturally prescribed feminine sexual self has *expanded* the possibilities for my sexual self, never restricted my ability to engage in sexuality in a particular way (as I believe heterosexual scripts did). It has expanded my understanding of the use of my body for pleasure and contributed to understanding my sexuality as a space in which I am free to explore.

Butch For Whom?

Harleys

[*Scene:* Standing inside the local outlaw biker club clubhouse on Friday evening, a friend and fellow graduate student, Dan, is showing me around the establishment where he is a member and is doing participant observation field work. An avid Harley Davidson enthusiast, he had invited me to the club to introduce me to his friends, enjoy a few beers

and show off his prized bike to me. As I am sitting astride the bike and Dan is revving the engine, I am dutifully showing my admiration for such a fine machine and making a fuss over certain features as I, of course, am expected to display my camaraderie with my friend. A friend of Dan's and my partner are standing nearby watching the show. Shortly, our small crowd of Harley admirers is approached by an unknown club member suitably dressed in dirty blue jeans, an old t-shirt, leather boots and a bandana on his head.]

"Go ahead and really rev it," Dan said. "It's a Harley. That's what it's made for."

Upon his command, I gave the throttle a good crank and felt my body vibrate in places I hadn't felt before. "Son of a bitch!" I responded, again demonstrating appropriate admiration for the massive machine that I was balancing between my legs.

Slugging his Budweiser and commenting on my obvious previous ignorance of how much a Harley Davidson vibrates, the unidentified biker belted out, "Yeah, it's cool, man. You just put your bitch on the back and, by the time, you get there, she's ready!" Accompanied by certain lewd gestures, his comment could not be misconstrued.

Dan and I exchanged a few confused glances as an extremely uncomfortable silence hung in the air where there had previously been deafening noise.

"Well, anyway, it's a nice bike," the unknown biker said nervously and he left to return to the pool table where his girlfriend had been waiting.

Dan and I just stood there and giggled. Dan was perplexed as to whether the unnamed interloper was talking to me or him. To me, it was readily apparent that he was addressing me but I was equally unsure of his intentions. Did he realize that I am female or did he mistake me for male? Did he assume that I am a dyke and determine that his

masculinist performance was hence appropriate? Was he aware that my partner was standing there observing the entire incident? Later that evening after a few more beers, I approached the man to ask him what he was thinking when he made the comment. He stated sheepishly that he knew I was female but that he did not know why he said what he did. Apparently, he just went on autopilot and did "biker" as he always did in such circumstances. He offered a half-hearted apology and we shared a beer and a laugh over it but the gender problematic remained unresolved.

Sisters

[*Scene*: Having just arrived to visit me in grad school, my sister, Cindy, and I stopped at the McDonalds near the Orlando airport to get her something edible after her economy flight. While munching on fries, we are chatting to catch up on the news.]

"So what's new?" she asked after we had already covered the pleasantries about her flight from Newark.

"Not much. School is keeping me as busy as ever," I replied.

"Are you still enjoying teaching as much as you were?" she asked.

"Oh yeah," I replied. "Teaching rocks. Just the other day I got to come out to my students. I showed them a picture of me in a wedding dress and then a tux. That's always fun."

"I bet that got their attention," she giggled with me.

"Oh yeah. I like to keep them on their toes."

"Speaking of wedding dresses, Mom told me Leslie is getting married soon and you're in the wedding." Mom makes it her job to keep us all apprised of each other's activities.

"Yep. In March. I have to wear another bridesmaid's dress. It's so demeaning."

"It's not demeaning to wear a dress. It's only demeaning if you make it demeaning. I think it is insulting to women for you to call it demeaning." Cindy was clearly affronted.

"Well, you know how much I hate dresses," I tried to stand my ground.

"Just because you hate dresses doesn't mean it is demeaning for all women to wear them," she pronounced indignantly.

Caught off guard and slight dumbfounded, I decided to change the subject. "Well, that's not until March. What do you want to do while you are here?"

Cindy's response caused me to seriously reconsider my thinking about dresses and femininity. After all, what was I implying about her if I suggested that wearing dresses and being femininized was demeaning to me? She likes wearing dresses at times and has no issues with femininity herself. My existence as one who will not accept the feminizing expectations force-placed on women problematizes her participation in such feminizing rituals. How shall she and other normatively-gendered female family and friends perceive my feelings? How does my problematic as a masculine female create a problematic for their acceptance of femininity? Is it possible to create a singular theory of gender while trying to encompass the lived experience of interaction? Perhaps our problematics are simply different. My project is to unhinge the relationship between female bodies and femininity while hers is to disconnect dresses, the signifier of femininity, from the appearance of disability. In many ways, it seems to me that my project might be easier to accomplish. I support the project of feminine women to undo the signification of disability. Perhaps we should concentrate on paying more attention to the overarching project–working to end assumptions of women's (and men's)

appearance of ableness, in favor of concentrating on each individual's *actual* ableness. Nonetheless, our different projects often make interaction complicated.

Butchness is not a unitary, undifferentiated understanding of self. If butchness is created in and through interaction, it is clearly enacted differently for different audiences. Given that gender is a regulatory regime in U.S. culture (Butler 1993 and 1996), then interacting with heterosexual women and heterosexual men requires a different performance and results in different performative experiences.

Additionally, part of the problematic of creating butchness is the lack of normative, cultural space to understand and interact with masculine females. How is a male to respond to a masculine female in a setting that has traditionally been all-male? There is no typical experience from which to draw. Should she be unproblematically accepted as "one of the guys" and the sexist bantering and "male bonding" be continued? Should the entire group revise its practices to accommodate a gender non-specific setting? The problematic is that there are no rules for how such a masculine female fits into this space. It is new and confusing ground to be covered.

Female masculinity does not fit into the compliant performance of self that Goffman (1959) describes. If it is a critique to the regulatory regime of gender that Butler discusses (and I believe it is), it only works as a critique because it is both recognizable and unrecognizable at the same time. Although Halberstam argues that the masculinity of females has a long history and has helped to construct what the entire culture knows as masculinity, it remains a space with uncertain rules. If Goffman describes conformity (the maintenance of order), how do we understand the maintenance of non-conformity? What are the rules for interacting with masculine females? If Goffman is right, there are no

options beyond masculinity and femininity because nothing else is recognizable. Hence, female masculinity is both uncommon and unavoidable–simultaneously recognizable and problematic. Butchness disrupts the rules of interaction at the same time that it reifies them. For those of us who enact butchness, it is necessary to avoid having our bodies/selves understood as incapable but also problematic as a dangerous space that challenges comfortable heteronormativity. The question is always whether to wear the dress and lose myself or wear the tux and cause everyone else to question themselves. As for me, I've tried the dress. From now on, I choose the tux.

CHAPTER 4
"MEASURING" SELVES: THE NARRATIVE ORGANIZATION OF BUTCH AND FEMME AS PUBLIC PERFORMANCE

When speaking of butch and femme as public self-presentation, notions of women's equality and feminism become a significant concern for lesbians. Images of butch and femme suggest a potential for power imbalance, yet most of my narrators explicitly spoke about feminism or expectations for egalitarian relationships. They were quite aware of the potential of political fallout from within the lesbian community for aligning too closely with heterosexual ideals, for as the old feminist critique goes, why would lesbians want to recreate gender roles that are patriarchal and oppressive to women (Jeffreys 1989 and 1996)? If butch and femme are "imitating heterosexuality," butch lesbians might be oppressing femme lesbians. Hence, lesbians are invested in not aligning with what are purportedly heterosexual ideals. But, how can public butch and femme appear similar to heterosexual masculinity and femininity and not be oppressive? How can we theorize butch and femme as egalitarian?

In this chapter, I argue that heteronormativity as both discourse–or what Holstein and Gubrium (2000) call discourses-in-practice–and discursive practice pervades discussion of public presentations of lesbian self. As such, lesbians are not so much borrowing from or imitating heterosexual paradigms as participating in the only paradigm that is available to all of us.

It is important to note that public performances and discussions of butch and femme include notions of both gender and sexuality–in public settings. In Chapter 5, I

concentrate on the assessment of butch and femme in private settings. While I do not believe it is possible to truly separate the public person from the private person, people are held accountable to what is appropriate in public as opposed to private settings. I find this separation more viable for the purposes of analysis than attempting to separate gender from sexuality; as my narrators will explain, both are present in public and private settings. Nonetheless, (sexualized) gender performance–appearance, fashion, non-sexual interaction, etc.–is often foregrounded as publicly appropriate, whereas (gendered) sexuality–intimate sexual interaction, gendered and sexualized notions of "inner" self, etc.–is more commonly understood as appropriate in private settings.

In making my argument about butch and femme as public self-performance, I propose three important points. First, I argue that individual performances of butch and femme are "measured" against a discursive standard in the everyday world of talk. That is, individuals have a sense of a stereotypic notion for each of butch and femme based on public discourses about each. Individuals' presentations of self are always compared to this standard and "measured" in a narrative sense, or, as I introduce shortly, in the case of the "butch/femme game," measured in a numerical sense. Gubrium et al (unpublished) discuss this as "benchmarking." In discussing the recovery of stroke patients, they argue that everyday assessments of functionality are benchmarked against a prior established standard. The assessment is not an official, medical assessment, but rather the judgment of their narrators assessing their own experiences of their worlds based on their own standard. Although my narrators exhibit a similar kind of benchmarking, I use the term "measurement" primarily to refer to my narrators' actual use of numbers on the butch/femme scale.

Second, the assessment of butch or femme or masculinity or femininity is not made simply through self-narration. Individuals are held accountable to ideals of butchness or femmeness *by others*. That is, the discursive practice of assessing whether someone exemplifies the categories well enough to earn the label is made by self and others.

Third, the standard against which butch and femme are measured is a heteronormative one. That is, butchness is generally held accountable *by non-lesbians* to heterosexual masculinity while femme is held accountable to heterosexual femininity. Hence, it is inescapable for lesbians to create an independent notion of lesbian gender or sexuality because it is always measured against a heterosexual standard.

I utilize analytic bracketing (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2000) to understand both the discourses ("the whats") used to describe butch and femme and the discursive practices ("the hows") engaged to produce them. I begin the chapter by discussing the discourses-in-practice of public butch and femme, including stereotypic notions of butch and femme and the notion of a "butch/femme scale." I, then, demonstrate how butchness or femmeness can be narratively measured through the discursive practice of scaling–by applying assumptions about butch and femme without specifically invoking a discussion of "scale."

Later, I discuss how accountability to a standard can create a sense of bifurcated consciousness for the individual, especially when stigma is associated with the assessment of gender and sexuality. I conclude the chapter by noting that all best efforts by lesbians to understand "lesbian gender" in an egalitarian manner are foiled by the coherence of heteronormativity as a vertical, not horizontal, relationship. Ultimately, I

argue that holding lesbians accountable to a heterosexual standard, for all practical purposes, negates the possibility of envisioning equality between butch and femme.

The Story of Public Butch and Femme–Discourses-in-Practice

The story of butch and femme is narrated via stereotypic notions of butchness and femmeness and the relationship between them. The stereotypes comprise the discourses-in-practice or substantive notions–"the whats," in the parlance of analytic bracketing (Gubrium and Holstein 1997)–about butch and femme against which individuals are measured. First, I outline the stereotypes about public presentation for each. Then I provide the discourse of the relationship between butch and femme.

I began the interviews by asking narrators to tell me about butch and femme–"what do those terms mean to you?" They explained that butch and femme are very visual concepts–they are easier to point out than they are to describe. So I pressed narrators to try to describe each. How are they recognized? Although it is often politically difficult to admit to seeing butch and femme exemplified in specific people–that would be "labeling"–visual cues were often called upon to describe and point out how butch and femme are recognized. Ric[15] explains.

> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): I want to say you can't [see it by the way lesbians look] but usually you can. You know, you see a couple and you pick that out, and it sort of does revert back to having some sort of masculine characteristics and some sort of feminine characteristics. [But it's] something more. I look at people and I see a couple and sometimes I think. "Huh, you know, they're butch/femme", or "Huh, they're very androgynous", you know. So it is sort of judgmental in labeling, but we do that. I do that. (Ric individual interview lines 145-62)

[15] In order to maintain confidentiality, all names provided are pseudonyms except my own. Additionally, direct quotes have been edited somewhat for grammar and to remove stutter speech and colloquialisms.

In the everyday world, performances of self are always understood as indicators of subjectivity–some demonstration of who we are (Goffman 1959). Performances of gender are always also understood as indicators of sexual subjectivity (Lorber 1996, West and Zimmerman 1987). As my narrator Sam, a budding gender theorist, argues below regarding a softball player whom she has not met but was watching play, in the everyday world, performances of gender and sexuality are always understood as interwined:

> Sam (23, student, often perceived by others as butch): I'm trying to make a conscious effort to separate sexuality from gender in some sense. But they don't simply …It's not inaccurate. It's true. We really just read a certain expression of gender as being inherent in that person's sexuality. And so, I've been making an effort but …we went to this softball game. I swear number 16 *has got* to be a dyke. She *has* to be. I mean she *had* to be. And I'm sitting there and I'm trying to figure out why. Why does number 16 have to be? …[It's because] she was *cocky*. She was cocky. And it may be obvious, but not very many heterosexual women are going to be masculine cocky, because it isn't attractive and they're not going to bag a guy if they act like that. So I'm just like, "Gosh, this one's a dyke and she's going to have *all kinds* of queer folks lined up after her." <all of us laugh> I mean she's just *hot* and she knows it. You know? And how many straight guys are going to get into that? (Sam and Jo couple interview lines 122-61)

Although Sam is reluctant to make presumptions about this softball player, she rationalizes via comparisons to heterosexual masculinity how (gendered) sexuality is visibly apparent. Consider Sam's reluctance to make the judgment, yet her feeling that she is practically compelled to do so. In the two following entries, Mindy expresses both her reluctance to "label" based on appearances and the expedience of doing so.

> Mindy (19, student, does not identify as butch or femme): I think it's more how we perceive others than how we perceive ourselves, because none of us want to label ourselves as butch, but you know when you are walking down the street, it's hard not to say, "That girl's gay because she has short hair" or because this reason or that reason. I don't know about anybody else. I know I do that. (Youth interview lines 566-71)

In a different interview after explaining the inappropriateness of assessing others' visible cues, Mindy explains why such assessment continues to happen:

> Sara: Do you think that butch and femme are still useful categories?
>
> Mindy: I think that the terms can be useful because they're often very descriptive, you know, of how a person looks or how they act or whatever. They can be categorized by using just one word. …Like if you're trying to find somebody, and [someone asks], "Well, what does she look like?" Instead of saying, "She's got short hair and she kinda dresses …." [You just say], "Well, she's real butch." I mean, I don't use those terms, but I've heard them used. So.
>
> Sara: So it's kinda shorthand.
>
> Mindy: Yeah. (Vanessa and Mindy couple interview lines 160-88)

Mindy's reluctance here is notable. She wishes to be able to say that she does not use visual cues to understand people, but she recognizes how the categories of butch and femme can be useful. As the age-old admonishment says, "You can't judge a book by its cover"–or at least you are not supposed to. Stereotyping based on personal appearance is often understood as inappropriate in our culture, especially in the post-Civil Rights, anti-racism rhetoric of supposed political correctness. Nonetheless, Mindy, Sam, Ric and many of my narrators seemed frustrated that they do often make judgments about other lesbians based on appearance.

But what does butch or femme look like? What identifies them?

Butch Looks and Behavior

My narrators were hesitant, but readily able, to identify what is *stereotypically* understood as butch. Generally, public butchness is described as characteristics of dress, behavior and interests. Notice also how narrators discuss butchness as being related to but distinct from masculinity.

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): An extreme butch would be somebody who, you know, wore men's underwear and was somebody who did everything to the point of passing as a male, but not wanting to become one, not going through with the operation.(Ellie individual interview lines 155-60)

In addition to this "extreme," Ellie talks about her butch partner and other butches as being "more direct" and as having "functional" interests. She used the example that her partner "has [a] cinder-block entertainment center and a kayak in her living room along with her bike and all of her sports equipment and a big huge basket full of softballs and her gloves." She explains that, for herself as femme, "The kayak just wouldn't be in my living room." (Ellie individual interview lines 160-73)

Faith provides another interpretation that calls on the 1950s paradigm as the iconic style of butch and femme.

> Faith (early 50s, merchant, does not identify): butch people might be a little more.... um...harder. Not mean–tough. (Faith individual interview lines 309-16) Well, butch, from the '50s [would wear] dungarees or jeans; we called them dungarees then. . . and then the cuffs would be rolled up and a little checkered shirt, you know? And maybe short hair. And then the partner would be very femme. Thinking about the '50s. Full skirt, and the bells and the little blouse with the collar up.
>
> Sara: Ok. In a very stereotypical sense.
>
> Faith: Right. (Faith individual interview lines 364-72)

I want to be clear also that my narrators were aware that these are stereotypes and as such generally not applicable to specific individuals. Nonetheless, my narrators were very fluent in the stereotypes.

Some of my narrators argued that butchness as public presentation is not necessarily specific to lesbians. Members of one focus group identify a kind of butchness that can be seen on rural, heterosexual women. Cathy introduces the idea of "the Bubba," recognized in rural bars "with their bubba bellies, and their flannel plaids, and [sitting

around a table with men and] something to drink. …including the kind of fertilizer that was on her cap." (Cathy, Community group p. 11) According to Cathy, this type of woman may be presumed to be heterosexual by her peers, but it is never very clear. Nonetheless, she seems to fit in seamlessly with local men in her town. This ambiguity, according to Cathy, makes it difficult to recognize lesbians in rural areas.

My younger focus group discussed how the same features that might be understood as butch among a lesbian audience were markers of lesbianism to a heterosexual audience–hence, the presumption that all lesbians look somewhat butch.

> Mindy (19, student, does not identify): [discussing stereotypes of looking butch] People that don't know any better would say a lesbian has short hair and wears masculine clothes and can play softball and all that.
>
> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify): And drives a truck.
>
> Mindy: And drives a truck and has the wallet.
>
> Vanessa: Swiss army knife
>
> Mindy: Yeah, and has the Swiss army knife. But the straight community then turns around and [says], "Well, OK, every girl that has short hair or dresses more masculine is gay," and so it's like you can't win either way. (Youth group lines 267-79)

So, to look butch is to stand out as lesbian. Karen and Cathy elaborate on how, to some heterosexual audiences, "lesbian," "dyke," "butch," and "a Bubba" are undifferentiated.

> Karen (42, grad student, butch): If you used the word dyke around one of my friends, she immediately goes "diesel dyke." It's not just another word for lesbian to her: You know, stocky, you drive a semi...
>
> Cathy: a Bubba
>
> Karen: Yeah, basically. The wallet thing, the whole nine yards. Of course, that's not who they [dykes] are. They're either androgynous or a femme; they're just not a Bubba. (Community group, p. 12)

In each instance, my narrators understood butch to have some potentially visible cues to lesbian audiences and to heterosexual audiences. Often these visible cues were described as having some relationship to heterosexual masculinity, although such cues were understood to be sometimes unreliable. Nonetheless, the rules for identifying butchness were widely understood and readily produced by all my narrators.

Femme Looks and Behavior

Visual cues were also identifiable for femmes. Again, femme is described similarly to heterosexual femininity in terms of dress, behaviors and interests. Both Vanessa and Ellie describe this in separate interviews.

> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify): I would think [a] femme would have long hair, wear make up, and walk like she cares that people are looking at her. (Vanessa and Mindy couple interview 505-6)

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): An extreme femme, like somebody who doesn't even pump her own gas–someone who has long nails and stuff like that."(Ellie individual interview lines 153-55)

Ellie goes on to describe femmes as having "more curve," a "softness"–in actions, not just dress. She explains that femmeness is a way of behaving, not just the wearing of certain fashions. She argues, "Even dykes that dress alike differentiate in how they wear the clothes (line 498-526)." She explains:

> Ellie (38, merchant, femme): [A femme friend] said the difference between a butch and a femme [is], when she goes out, when she meets a couple, a butch/femme couple, she can tell who's the butch and who's the femme–the femme is the one she wants to take out for coffee and chat with. (Community group p. 8)

Faith explains how she sometimes recognizes femmeness among her lesbian clients.

> Faith (early 50s, merchant, does not identify): They dress, you know, girly. Usually dresses, skirts and tops. Sometimes their hair can be really short, but I think it might have a little. . . just a little extra

> Sara: Attention?
>
> Faith: Attention to it, right. A little extra, maybe gel or something. Maybe more jewelry, probably some makeup, too. Accessories. I'm into accessories myself, and I always notice things like that. (Faith individual interview lines 397-401)

Consider how Faith relates femmeness to femininity–"you know, girly." Below, Eli describes femme as related to femininity–to which she is attracted and that which is oppositional to herself.

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): It's some woman who embraces that feminine side and, you know, works it. I mean like, really loves it, you know? Enjoys smelling good, looking good. All that stuff, dressing up. I like that. I think it's really cool when somebody can embrace that, you know? [pause] I mean I think it's easy for a lot of women to embrace that. It's kind of strange to me, cause I don't know what that's like. So for me, it's like, "Wow, you're embracing your feminine side." To me, that's a totally different animal [from herself], you know? (Eli individual interview, lines 863-69)

Like butchness, femmeness was widely described as having visual cues. As with butchness, my narrators were aware that visual cues did not always accurately describe the individual or the identity she might define for herself. Nonetheless, all my narrators were able to provide a description of femmeness with wide-ranging similarity. Additionally, most narrators described both butch and femme in reference to heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Given that stereotypic notions of butch and femme are so widely understood, it is curious that most of my narrators were so reluctant to state specifically who might exemplify these categories and showed great discomfort at admitting they often see people whom they haven't met as fitting into those categories.

Schutz (1967, 1970) argues that categorizing is implicit in human thought. He argues that language is the process of "typification"–categorizing "the typical" that is found in one's experiences. For Schutz, categorizing is essential to efficiently processing

all the images we encounter in our daily lives. What Schutz leaves unanswered is how many categories are necessary to make sense of the world. Presumably if language is flexible and dynamic, there is no reason to expect a finite number of categories. Certainly, two all-encompassing categories used to describe lesbians should give us cause for caution. As it turns out, my narrators did not see butch and femme as two completely distinct categories. They were discussed as a range of possibilities.

Butch and femme are often discussed as existing on a "scale." Essentially, butch occupies one end of the continuum, whereas femme occupies the other. Individuals are expected to fall some place on this continuum, whether closer to either extreme or somewhere more moderate in the middle. This language suggests that the assessment of whether someone is butch or femme is a process of measuring–which I call *narrative measuring*. As I explain below, the process of measuring may contain discourses-in-practice that are actually numerical, or the measuring may take place via a more narrative form of assessment via discursive practice.

The Butch/Femme Scale and the Butch/Femme Game

Not only is butch/femme a conceptual continuum, but through my narrators, I learned about a "butch/femme scale," comprised of an actual numbering system. Indeed, in one focus group, my partner and I were invited to participate in the "butch/femme game" which was being played during a meeting of a local discussion group comprised of primarily younger women. The group meets on a regular basis and this particular night the moderator decided to introduce the butch/femme game as a fun exercise. In the game, the group members sit in a circle and rate a particular group member on the butch/femme scale based on her responses to a barrage of impromptu questions posed by the group members. My partner and I participated as members of the group in the butch/femme

game and were also put in the center–the hot seat–to be judged on the scale as others had. As it turns out, many of my narrators of all ages had been exposed to "the scale" in various forms and many had played some form of group activity like a game that was intended to rate the butchness or femmeness of individuals on the scale as judged by the group, ostensibly for fun. The game in which we participated was a kind of exemplar of the use of "the scale" on a more widespread basis. Throughout this chapter, I discuss "the game" as the discussion group in which I participated and "the scale" as a more widespread conceptual notion of the scaleable relationship of butch to femme. Below, the moderator of the group I attended introduces the game in which the scale is utilized to rate individual participants of the group.

> Group Moderator of Butch/Femme Game: I'll tell you how the game is played . . . Basically, it's supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be entertaining, and it can even be enlightening. . . . What you're going to do is walk for us, sit for us in the [middle of the circle] and we ask you all kinds of questions. Of course, you can pass at any time there's something you don't want to answer. …And at the end of that–this is the scary part–everyone will rate you on the Butch-Femme Scale. . . . Now here is the scale. [Draws picture on the board.] This [points to left side] is so femme it makes me want to cry. And this [points to right side] is ultra, ultra super butch. . . . The reason why the scale [is] from zero to 10 [is that] if there wasn't a zero, then statistically speaking five and half would be androgynous. I wanted to have even numbers so five would be completely and utterly, utterly androgynous. Zero is painfully femme, and ten is super butch. Butch-o-rama. …Okay, is there anybody here who feels uncomfortable doing this? If you do feel uncomfortable when it's your turn, if you really don't want to walk or get up there, you don't have to. But it really is a lot of fun. (Butch/Femme Game p. 2 lines 4-32)

The scale she has drawn appears as below. It is important to note that the scale is drawn horizontally.

The Butch/Femme Scale

Femme Butch

0/1----------10

One gets the sense from the moderator of the game that, not only is there a type of measuring happening, but that there is a need for statistical accuracy. The narrator speaks of this exercise as a game intended to provide "a lot of fun" but also as an exercise that can be "enlightening." In the narrative usage of butch and femme, it is common to see this relationship between humor and a deeper sense of "realness." The following narrator exemplifies this combination of humor and realness.

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): Hon, I'm always a one. <laughs> However, maybe a 1.2.

Notice how the narrator below both questions the scale and understands it to be a real description of herself–albeit somewhat coached by others.

> Cathy (42, social worker, identifies as butch–a "7"): [After describing a childhood of boyish interests and making an argument for essential origins of gender] I have always thought of myself as a "5" until about 4 years ago when people corrected me–"Oh, no, You're a 7." Okay. Well, what's a 1? . . . I'm ovulating today, and so I don't feel like I'm a 7. So I think for me it's not a choice. (Community group p. 4)

The confusion in Cathy's quote between questioning the scale and ultimately understanding gender and sexuality as innate is common. Cathy's alignment of her place on the scale with an argument of essential gender suggests the notion of the scale is understood to be very real in some sense. Several narrators spoke earnestly about "the scale" and talked of taking quizzes in various publications to assess one's place on the scale. Some saw this as a humorous pastime–a kitchy kind of joke. Others seemed almost convinced at the scale's descriptive usefulness–surprised that their score could have been so "accurate." As humor or reality, the notion of a scale seemed to be present in many settings in lesbian communities. Indeed, there is a butch/femme "test" to assess one's place on the scale on an Internet website. Many of my narrators from separate groups referred to its existence. Having taken the test myself, I noticed the potentially explosive

issue of humor versus realness written into the test instructions. Before one takes the test, there are a number of disclaimers assuring the participant that the test is intended only for humor and should not be taken too seriously, as apparently some past irate participants have done. Terry explains her distress below.

> Terry (late 40s, professor, does not identify): There was this Internet site. For awhile, I was on this list serve of married women who thought either they were lesbian or were curious about it. And we were passing around this test about butch and femme on the Internet. It was semi-serious, but I didn't take it really seriously, and most of the women didn't seem to take it very seriously either on the list serve, but you know, everybody took the test and you e-mailed the results back to the list serve about yourself, and there were so many that were soft butch. It was kind of like the soft butch thing, you know? And the questions were just…, you would die! (Terry and Gilda interview page 15)

I found this tension between humor and "realness" very curious and took opportunities to discuss it with other narrators. After explaining to me that the butch/femme scale was a popular party favor during the early 1990s, the next group of narrators addresses the issue of realness.

> Sara: Well, what's really interesting about this thing to me is that people always talk about it being humorous. (Martha: Oh, yeah.) You know, "It's not real. It's not real. So don't be concerned."
>
> Dana (47, health professions, butch): But it was for real. It's totally real, because for every person, you or I could put them on this scale. (Nancy and Martha: Yeah.)
>
> Martha (46, social worker, does not identify) [to Dana]: Like what are you? (Nancy laughs)
>
> Dana: 8/9. Definitely butch.
>
> Martha: I'm like 5/6. [to Nancy] What are you?
>
> Nancy (41, health professional, does not specifically identify): I'd say I'm like 6/7. But if somebody were to look at me, they would probably put me around 8. (Martha: Yeah.) But I don't think of myself as that. (Club group lines 152-80)

Note here that, not only does Dana explain the "realness" of the scale, but each member can readily place themselves on the scale with agreement of the others. Also, in this last comment, Nancy points to an important characteristic of the scale as it relates to appearance. She suggests that how one measures one's self on the scale is not necessarily the defining evidence of who she is. Just as important as self-definition is the recognition that others will use the scale to rate you and that your appearance may not rate the same as how you feel about your inner sense of self. Below, Dana sums up the importance of the scale:

> Dana: But see, we all have our concept of what those numbers mean and where people fit on it. That makes it real to me, because it is a real thing that happens. That butch/femme is definable somehow.
>
> Nancy: Exactly. I think it has to do with what Martha was saying, that we don't have anything else to. . . the only model that we have is male/female.
>
> Dana and Martha: Um hmm (Club group lines 182-89)

Dana sums up her perceptions about why "the scale" exists.

> Dana: I think that was a real simplified way that the concept of butch/femme was explained to lesbians who had never thought about butch/femme, who never had it in their perspective. And maybe it was bringing out butch/femme or a butch or a femme [for someone who] hadn't like thought of it in the whole context of the lesbian world. It was a really easy way, and fun way, to kind of explore those differences or those similarities. But I do think in [the town where research was completed] that that has moved on. (Club group 108-20)

Nancy and Dana make three important points in this exchange. First, it is the usage of the scale that makes it "real" enough for producing lesbian self. Second, lesbians have used the butch/femme scale as a teaching tool to explain the concepts of butch and femme to women just beginning to interact within lesbian communities. And, third, that the notion of a scale is based on a heteronormative model for lack of other options. So, the sense of realness about the scale derives from its usefulness in describing or making

sense of lesbian relationships and its seeming relationship to the ever-present heteronormative model.

Several of my narrators argue that the use of the butch/femme scale does seem to be somewhat of a fad. Dana stated in the last frame that the butch/femme scale has not been as actively practiced in the last several years. Interestingly, among the women that I interviewed, women over age 30 were much more likely to identify specifically as butch or femme and sometimes provide for me their place on the scale. But the group of women under age 30 were much more reluctant to place any label on themselves. And, although the discussion group that played the butch/femme game was a younger group primarily under the age of 30, the use of a numbering scheme was not very present among younger lesbians. But younger women were no less able to accomplish *scaling*–that is, narratively assessing a sense of butchness or femmeness.

The Discursive Practices of Narrative Measuring

Measuring against a scale can occur as a process that is not substantively stated as such. Without using concept of a scale, many of my narrators accomplished a sense of measurement through their discursive practices. Here, I outline the processes of narrative measurement–"the hows" in the parlance of analytic bracketing (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) — of narratively measuring butch and femme.

Younger narrators were very reluctant to publicly identify themselves as butch or femme and reluctant to admit they used those ideas to understand others. Yet, they provided recent instances of ways in which butch and femme had been discussed among friends. One narrator relates a story of how her group of friends uses the ideas of butch

and femme in playful and humorous ways that are presumably not meant to be "real" or serious. She understands the ideas as entertainment.

> Wendy (23, corporate professional, looks "gay boy"): I remember at the [bar/restaurant] one night, there was a whole group of us and we were all lesbians, and we were talking about, "Are you butch or femme?" Instead of using outside appearance, [they used other indicators.]. Like my friend [names a friend], who appears to be so feminine, actually puts her wallet [in her back pocket]. Well, we said, "What kind of wallet do you use?" And then we talked about where we pull it from –whether it would be your cargo pocket or your back pocket and that kind of thing. And then we talked about underwear. I mean, we all kind of show our underwear. I have Victoria's Secret whereas my friend, [names a different friend], had on boxers. And then [first friend] didn't have on any, so it was so hard to just [use butch and femme "accurately."]. . . It was funny though, because we all just joked around. "What kind of watch do you have on?" or that kind of thing. Or "what kind of car do you drive?" "Oh, well, you drive a truck, then you're butch." That kind of thing. It is fun to talk about it. Nobody got offended. But I think you have to be in the right group of people, because some people get really offended. But that's generally kind of it. It ends up being like a fun conversation. (600-13)

In this passage, Wendy works very hard to explain to me how the stereotypes of butch and femme are not very useful or descriptive for her group of friends and how it is only understood as humor. But her ability to use those stereotypes is quite telling. She makes a sincere argument that butch or femme cannot be seen accurately by describing her first friend, who "appeared to be so feminine" but was clearly not, because she puts her wallet in the wrong pocket and does not wear underwear. But despite all sincerity, Wendy demonstrates that she is quite competent at assessing butch and femme–she knows the rules as do, apparently, all of her friends. After all, we know–or are presumed to already understand–that wallets, watches, underwear, vehicles and even behaviors (wallet placement) are gendered. Wendy demonstrates that we all have certain knowledges–whether from our local (in this case, lesbian) communities or broader media-

saturated mainstream culture–about how we expect masculinity and femininity to look as a coherent package. We need not assign a number to assess a sense of scale.

In my own group of friends, this kind of narrative measurement occurs in everyday conversation. Several graduate school friends and I have a habit of humorously giving out "butch points" for random everyday accomplishments, especially fixing things. A friend chatting about her day might say something like, "Hey, I get extra butch points today because I changed the telephone outlet by myself." One straight friend, in particular, is fond of pointing out when she deserves "butch points" because she is often assessed as very femme–an assessment she both enjoys and works to discredit. It is understood that our use of butch points is intended as humorous, but also it is tinged with a bit of realness in that we can readily make such assessments with wide agreement. In one conversation, several friends pointed out that we do not give out "femme points" and we should begin to do so. Although we all agreed that would be the feminist thing to do, it never caught on.

Measuring Competence

The next conversation among my narrators points out hidden assumptions about gender that are rarely spoken but are put into narrative practice regularly. Sam and Jo are partners, describing an event they witnessed. Recall Sam's comments at the beginning of the chapter about a particular softball player whom she identified as recognizably lesbian and "absolutely" butch. Sam was not exactly clear about why the softball player was so visibly butch.

> Jo (19, student, doesn't identify): Yeah. It wasn't just the softball uniform.
>
> Sam (23, student, has a butch self-image): Yeah, well, being in the uniform, too.

> Sara: Not just by putting on the uniform, but because even in the uniform she is [butch]….
>
> Sam: All right, the way she was [swinging a bat, she was] hitting her back with it and she's all kickin' up dirt and <makes a gruff noise>. I mean she was butch.
>
> Jo: She didn't bat very well, though.
>
> Sam: That was the problem. Yeah. She couldn't hit. And she just messed up at catching or something. (Sam and Jo couple interview lines 206-26)

Jo's departure from Sam's assessment of the softball player's appearance would seem to be almost a change of subject here. But the jump from appearance to competence is so seamless that it requires notice. Here, the notion of competence ("She didn't bat very well, though.") is part of the assessment of butchness. As the narrative goes, the softball player gets high marks for her cocky attitude, but a potential subtraction for her lack of ability. These are not separate assessments of butchness but a singular analysis of whether the softball player was, in fact, "absolutely" butch. Hence, the assessment is not numerical, but it is a form of narrative measuring. It is worthy of note that the softball player was ultimately assessed as butch, even though her competence was apparently in question. This suggests that performance is of greater importance than competence. I will return to this point shortly.

Some underlying assumptions for *narrative* measurement

Let me return briefly to the Butch/Femme Game, a game in which I was very competent as a participant. We did indeed seat people in the middle of the room and assault them with questions, then require them to step outside in order to vote as a group over their place on the scale. Several people went through the rigors of this process, including my partner and myself. We were interviewed together as a couple.

I looked back at the questions that were used to assess butchness or femmeness among participants. Interestingly, each participant of the Butch/Femme Game was able to actively throw out questions for the person in the hot seat with no coaching as to what kinds of questions might be pertinent in this game. Each person was able to make a numerical assessment at the end of each interviewee's turn and the assessments were relatively consistent among those handing out the scores. What was most curious is that *no one presumed that anyone needed to be coached* as to how to play the game or on what comprises butch and femme. Everyone was already assumed to have that knowledge, and apparently everyone did, with a high degree of consistency.

As the questions within the Butch/Femme Game suggested, there are two major themes involved in narrative measuring–appearance and competence. But the questions used to measure butchness and femmeness were not equitably distributed between these categories. The following are some characteristics used to assess butch and femme qualities during the Butch/Femme Game in which I participated. I list them below as, first, questions designed to assess butchness, then as questions designed to assess femmness, although there was no such organization during the game.

Characteristics Used for Assessing Butchness

Appearance/Performance:

"Do you own a tux?" (B/F Game p. 3 line 32)

"I have real short hair." (B/F Game p. 4 line 2)

"Do you wear boxers?" (B/F Game p. 11 line 40)

Competence:

"Do you play softball?" (B/F Game p. 3 line 13)

"Do you often do outdoor activities?" (B/F Game p. 10 line 22)

"Do you know how to change a tire? (B/F Game p. 10 line 30)

"Do you know how to change your oil?" (B/F Game p. 10 line 38)

Characteristics Used for Assessing Femmeness

Appearance/Performance:

"How many pairs of shoes do you own?" (B/F Game p. 3 line 5)

"Do you pluck your eyebrows?" (B/F Game p. 5 line 11)

"Have you ever worn a thong?" (B/F Game p. 6 line 27)

"Have you ever visited the Lancome counter?" (B/F Game p. 6 line 39)

"How many dresses have you worn in the last year?" (B/F Game p. 11 line 30)

Competence:

?????????

The questions to assess public butchness concerned both physical appearance and physical competence. They also included some assessment of "taking charge" and aggressiveness, at times with sexual implications. There were some questions to assess

butch incompetence, but those related generally to things that might be considered "women's work"–for example, joking about not being able to cook. These questions assumed a certain sense of competence and an expectation that to earn the title "butch," one must qualify through accomplishments. As I argued in Chapter 3, butchness is assumed to entail a sense of ableness–with no frills. Ableness means ability to do those things that are generally reserved for men to do.

The questions to assess femmeness concentrated much more on appearance with practically nothing related to competence. Curiously, those tasks stereotypically understood as "women's work" were not asked as competence. For example, one could have asked, "Can you cook?" as a sign of competence at cooking. Instead, the question was more likely to be phrased, "Who does the cooking?" as though competence was not required or recognized, except for the notion that someone would be relegated to that work. Indeed, femme competence was assessed only by how much energy was spent on appearance.

At one point, two participants discussed the behavior of the person in the hot seat: "Did you notice how she looked at her nails?" [Apparently, viewing her finger nails open-handed, palm down, was a much more feminine behavior than viewing them palm up in an almost closed fist.] "Dude, you're losing stature." (B/F Game p. 3 line 42 and p.4 line 2) Evidently, presenting feminine gestures would be considered losing stature.

Interestingly, being assessed at extreme ends of the scale was understood as problematic and discouraged, especially for butches. As a case in point, I was assessed as an 8. After the game, I asked several participants why I was not assessed higher–at a 9 or 10. I had purposefully tried to enhance my image as butch by mentioning that I owned a

diesel engine and did some repairs on it myself, among other characteristics that I thought might blow my score off the scale. The participants told me that I did rate higher on the scale because of the diesel engine but that I could not be accorded too high a score because I smiled too much and I was too playful with my partner. As I was told, these were good qualities that saved me from being rated too highly.

Although the younger narrators stated they were less comfortable using labels or scales, they were no less well trained at *scaling* narratively. They were fully capable at narratively assessing butch or femme as a scalable concept. I am willing to bet, with little training, you would be able to narratively assess butchness or femmeness because it is based on a heterogendered coherence system that is so widely familiar as to be trite.

Additionally, it strikes me as not coincidental that the butch/femme scale places femme at 0 and butch at 10. It becomes clear through the process of scaling that competence or ableness is expected for butches, whereas even the implication of femmeness causes one to "lose stature."

Stigma, Bifurcated Consciousness and Accountability

My narrators were aware of a general sense of stigma and the potential for stereotyping that comes with any discussion of butch and femme. When asked to tell what butch or femme meant to them, many narrators began explaining apprehension about stigmas. These stigmas are worthy of noting here.

Butch Stigma

Stigma against butchness, especially what might be perceived as "extreme" butchness, was a common discussion among my narrators. To be a bit butch might be

OK, but to be really butch was understood as discouraged. Several of my narrators demonstrate this stigma:

> Louise (32, student, femme dyke): I do really think that to a lot of people–gay men and a lot of straight people–you hear the word lesbian or you hear the word dyke and the picture people think about is "bull dagger," that type of person.
>
> Sara: Do you think they identify that as butch?
>
> R: Yeah. . . . I think the expectation is it's not palatable or attractive to be butch. And people can't handle it. ...that maybe a dyke is someone who's not in good shape or has, you know, short hair or that traditional lesbian haircut: you know, the mullet–short [on top]-long [in back] haircut. And I still think that's kind of the expectation of what people think in their minds (Louise individual interview, lines 1555-94)

Another narrator explains butch stigma:

> Wendy (23, corporate professional, looks "gay boy"): I used to have a lot of issues when I was younger. I didn't want to be really butch because of negative stigma with my cousins who are out. My cousin is very self-conscious; she's probably 40 and, um, she would think the world was staring at her every time she went to a restaurant [she would say people stare], "Oh, because I have short hair" or "because I look like a man," you know. I think it's just [that]society places a negative stigma on butch. (Youth group interview lines 239-49)

Several narrators noted that they were often assumed to be butch although they did not identify as butch. Other people had apparently labeled them butch based on appearance whereas each thought that was not descriptive of how she understood herself. Jo provides an example.

> Jo (19, student, doesn't identify): [Responding to someone calling her butch] I was like, "I'm not butch. I'm not butch." [To the group] I don't know if everybody thinks I'm butch, but I'm not. I'm just kind of like in between. I'm not either/or. I don't know. I am very femmy, but I act butch and whatever. I'm kind of like in between. And [someone said], "You're really butch," and I'm like, "No, I'm not! [sad voice]" I don't know, I don't know why I did that or why. . . (Youth group lines 172-6)

Jo's ardent pleas demonstrate the implicit stigma of butchness. This stigma is quite pervasive. In a prior study of lesbian personal ads (Crawley 2001), I found a common practice was to state "No butches" in advertising to find a mate. I found no such equivalent stating "no femmes." In the next passage, the conundrum for butches is more specifically expressed.

> Terry (late 40s, professor, does not identify): [referring to butch appearance] Well, your appearance is going to reflect your personality. If you feel that you're, you know, needing to be the tough person so that people don't walk on you or treat you like a woman, then you act like a man, so that you're in control.
>
> Gilda (early 50s, occupation not provided, does not identify): Yeah, it's like we're trying to exert influence over other people and express ourselves at the same time, and the dynamic of the butch is a manifestation of personality, but it's also a kind of in-your-face: "I want you think I'm a man, but I don't want you to squash me like a bug because I'm a female." You know?
>
> Terry: And feminists would like to think that we really don't have to do that. We don't have to go to the extreme of dressing extremely butch or getting a man's haircut or getting chains or whatever, in order to have people not approach us. You know, that goes against my grain, it really does. (Terry and Gilda couple interview, page 14)

Terry and Gilda's comments above are quite compelling. As I argued in Chapter 3, they also suggest that butches' attempts to exert influence over the audiences to whom they perform self. They act in such a way so as not to be "squashed like a bug" for being female. In the purest sense of Goffman's performance of self (1959), butches work to manage their audience's sense of themselves as worthy of participation. Unfortunately, butch performance is always read as "acting like a man," even by these self-professed feminists. Butch stigma, then, is *not acting like a woman*. Neither of these women are proponents of femininity, but their distaste for butchness gets caught in the gender conundrum for people with female bodies. To avoid being treated as a women, you must

exert non-feminine behaviors[16] to a heterosexual audience, causing you to be stigmatized for "acting like a man." Their discussion illuminates that there is no middle ground. The option of androgyny, for all practical purposes, does not exist. Regardless of whether or not one dresses up femininity, "women" are "squashed like a bug," while "butches" are stigmatized for not being women.

Femme Stigma

The stigma for femmes is very different, and it depends significantly on context. In a lesbian context, it may imply one is not "really" lesbian. To look femme is to be assumed to be attempting to hide one's lesbianism. Andi and Wanda comment in separate interviews.

> Andi (21, student, does not identify): My first two girlfriends said, "You're not gay." It was assumed that I was more feminine and ended up being labeled straight. (Youth group lines 254-56)

> Wanda (35, merchant, fast forward femme): I definitely have had experiences where I've been in a lesbian social [occasion] by myself without a partner, a date or whatever, and totally been invisible–just completely assumed by everyone that I was the token straight girl, because I was so femme. Which probably is part of what makes me more forward, because I wanted it known pretty quickly that I'm not. (Cathy and Wanda couple interview page 2)

In another interview, Vanessa and Mindy jointly discuss the femme stigma that Vanessa feels.

> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify): I can definitely relate to that because of looking straight [which implies she is femme]. . . . I really hate the whole butch/femme thing because there are things that I do that I think would be butch.

> Mindy (Vanessa's partner, 19, student, does not identify): Let me tell you, she can handle a drill better than I can. <laughs>

---

[16] Notice that I did not suggest that these behaviors must be *anti*-feminine–that is, misogynist. See Chapter 3 for a clearer description of my argument on this issue.

> Vanessa: If there is something that needs to be fixed around the house, I'm the one with the drill, electric staple gun or a hammer. I love that kind of stuff, you know. . . . It's like all the lesbians play softball. . . . So I definitely related. I do. I feel like a lot of times I get overlooked [as not lesbian] because I have more feminine appearance. (Youth group lines 358-69)

Vanessa explains how the femme as straight-looking stigma feeds on both lesbian stigma and heteronormative stigma. To be too straight-looking suggests one may be femme. To be femme is to suggest one is less physically competent or not "really" lesbian. Hope explains her frustration:

> Hope (42, medical field, does not identify): [Having said that others may see her as femme] I want to feel like I can pick and chose whatever I want. I mean I run a chainsaw and I've done butch things, but it should be okay for me. It should be me, and it shouldn't be a role. And even with my partner, with what she saw me doing, she couldn't get past that thing. Before I moved out of our house, I had bought some file cabinets–the wooden ones. And I moved out before I got them built, after I moved out, she asked who I [got] to build the file cabinets. I was like, "What the hell makes you think I can't get out a screwdriver and put them together?" …as many things she had seen me put together! I mean we owned a couple of tractors together. And to me, that's a put down–that you are more capable. (Hope individual interview, lines 218-227)

Ric sums up the issue.

> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): And I think it's a problem with language, too, because you talk about femme and then you want to talk about feminine characteristics. Our society is so negative about it. When all the feminine traits are assumed to be derogatory, then how can you call something femme without demeaning it? It's a problem with our language–which is sort of what I guess postmodern is [a concern for meaning and language]. (Ric individual interview, lines 1145-49)

Femme stigma is *accountability to "women's role"* or second-class status in the heteronormative paradigm. Those tasks at which women are expected to be competent, or at least for which they are responsible, are not understood as competence worthy of recognition. It is competence/work that is taken for granted and understood as demeaning.

My narrators understood that these stigmas existed but were not as clear on how they operated. Many expressed a general feeling of distrust about "labels" and discomfort with open discussions of butch and femme but were not able to identify the specific dynamic that led to their feelings of discomfort. Most of my narrators, whether proponents or opponents of butch and femme, clearly were concerned about egalitarianism in their relationships and equality in general in their communities. They seemed to recognize that feminist notions were involved in discouraging extremes of butch or femme. But they had difficulty locating the source of the problem. The resolution for a politics of equality was very unclear.

Bifurcated Consciousness

Measures such as "the butch/femme scale," which is presumably a product of some national-level lesbian community, given the prevalence of "quizzes" in lesbian magazines and "tests" on the Internet, provide a sense of a lesbian standard to which individuals are held. These discursive constructions are co-opted as narrative resources to reference the everyday self. Dorothy Smith's (1987) notion of *bifurcated consciousness* combined with a symbolic interactionist notion of everyday selves offers one way to theorize the relationship between community discourses and everyday narrations of self.

Narrative measuring of self takes place through a process Smith refers to as bifurcated consciousness. Individuals respond to certain "relations of ruling" that are mediated through texts and institutions and that operate through discourses that seem to appear everywhere and nowhere at the same time, in a conceptual order, rather than a bodily experience. Whether the butch/femme scale or discourses about scaling are used, the notions of stereotypical "butches" and "femmes" and butch/femme as a continuum provide an organizing system against which individuals measure themselves and against

which other community members measure individuals. The experience of one's bodily self must always be measured against these ever-present schemes. Hope admits to feeling observed and measured.

> Sara: Do you feel pressured to identify yourself as femme?
>
> Hope (42, medical field, does not identify): I do, 'cause I feel like everybody else identifies that way, and they're not gonna know how to treat me otherwise. (Hope individual interview, lines 128-132)

The bifurcation occurs when that which one experiences with one's body in the everyday practice of life is separate from the conceptual order of ruling institutions–such as the butch/femme scale. The standards are ubiquitous–seemingly everywhere –or as Foucault would say, the surveillance is panoptical (1977). When one's own experience does not seem to fit the paradigm, one must negotiate a sense of placement in relationship to the paradigm. This makes the notion of a continuum very useful. If I feel sort of butch but not "really" butch, I can just drop my score slightly until I feel as though I fit–maybe I'm a 7 instead of a 9. Conversely, if I enjoy my long hair but also use power tools, I simply increase my score slightly, say from a 1 to a 3.

The public selves we live by are artfully created through the available narrative resources (Holstein and Gubrium 2000)–"butch" and "femme." But they suffer the performance pressure provided by widely-produced relations of ruling available through media-saturated cultural texts. These discourses are ruling relations in lesbian communities–that is, mediated through lesbian culture–and are involved in broader ideals in mainstream culture. The continual measurement against these standards produces a general feeling of being assessed–a narrative measuring. Who am I versus who should I be? The question is why these particular discourses appear to be so similar to heteronormative standards.

The discourses-in-practice of heteronormativity are amazingly pervasive in mainstream U.S. culture (Lorber 1994 and 1996). To avoid them altogether is impossible because all coherence would be lost. As the butch/femme phenomenon illustrates, the specific discourses of heteronormativity need not be used for the coherence system to be followed. It is not just the discourses, but the discursive practices that continue to perpetuate heteronormative ideals. Thus, to explain the production of reality, a theory of performance must incorporate, not just the discourses that are spoken (i.e., *what* is said), but also the assumptions underlying the practice of interaction (i.e., *how* meaning is produced).

In a germinal ethnomethodological piece, "Doing Gender," West and Zimmerman (1987) explain *how* gender is produced in practice. They argue that once one's sex is presumed, a social sex category is assigned, and one must behave according to the rules of masculinity and femininity. This implies two important points. First, gender is an accomplishment. It is a thing we do–a performance (Butler 1993 and 1996). Second, we are all held accountable for our gender presentations. In my estimation, this is the idea of greatest importance that West and Zimmerman advance and one that is too frequently overlooked by gender theorists.

My narrators referred frequently to the idea of how others see them as butch or femme in ways that they themselves would not identify. It was a source of great discomfort, providing the greatest impetus to measure one's self. Without the watchful, measuring eyes of others attempting to make sense of the individual, there would be much less reason to feel accountable to the scale. The general need to dodge stereotypes or negotiate stigmas derives more from interaction than self-measurement. My narrators

were at least as attentive to how others view them or "mis-identify" them as they were attentive to how they identify themselves.

The other important contribution of West and Zimmerman, borrowing from a lengthy and time-tested feminist literature, is that the defining feature of self is simultaneously sex and sex category[17]. Individuals are always held accountable to the socially defined sex category that is based on their presumed biological sex. Their experience as "women" requires them to be held accountable to the heteronormative paradigm, which no one can escape. Whether negotiating butch stigma or femme stigma, the relations of ruling hold them accountable as women.

A conversation with two narrators drove home this point. They suggested that gay men seem to readily accept the many labels available for gay men. Anecdotally, we produced several among ourselves just from discussions that each of us had had with gay men. There is "circuit boy," "chicken," "chicken hawk," "bear," and "leather man" just to name a few. Why would gay men be accepting of such narrative resources whereas lesbians are leery of butch and femme?

> Mindy (19, student, does not identify): I think because lesbians have been stigmatized by these terms. They have been, for *years*, like since the '70s [sic] you know, you're one or the other. Once you're in one category, that's all your options. Then it comes with a whole list of things you have to be or do or act. And we don't want to be pushed into those roles 'cause we know that that's not who we are. But I think gay men are — far be it for me to say, 'cause I'm not one — I think that they want to have ownership. You know, they want to say, "Well, I'm a top!" They like these labels. They'll even ask somebody, or they'll have conversations about being tops or bottoms or whatever. And if one person does not fit a certain thing, that's it. There's gonna be no dating, there's gonna be no

[17] I do not intend to suggest that sex somehow supersedes other defining characteristics of bodies such as race. For many people, race may indeed be understood to supercede sex as a defining attribute. But among my largely white sample, speaking about their experiences as lesbians, sex was discussed as a defining feature of physical interaction.

> sex, there's gonna be no friendship because this label cannot conceive of being with that label.

Gay men's labels are generally sexual identifications–ways to find specific partners. Hence, their labels are about personal, sexual expression–exercising autonomy. Conversely, public butch and femme for lesbians are about being held publicly accountable to "women's" responsibility. The options for women are more limiting, rather than conducive to personal autonomy. To be too butch is to be not woman enough and to be too femme is to be derided for incompetence.

Most of my narrators tried to avoid using stereotypic notions for each other or themselves. Many expressed a concern for letting people determine for themselves how they will be understood by others. Labels would be fine if they were self-imposed. Unfortunately, Faith points out that making sense of the world involves using words to describe others.

> Faith (early 50s, merchant, does not identify): It seems like to talk about it you almost have to put people [in categories]. . . you have to label them. . . (Faith individual interview lines 489-491)

Schutz (1967 and 1970) would agree. So, why is it so difficult to understand butch and femme as harmless variation? After all, isn't the scale horizontal?

Heteronormativity, Science and the Coherence of Vertical Orientation

It should not be surprising that this "scale" and the practice of scaling looks so similar to heteronormativity or that scaling and measurement are the goal. Indeed, the typing of individuals and the measurement of desire have been the primary goal of modernist, positivistic science in the 20th century (Fausto-Sterling 1985 and 2000; Schiebinger 1993; Zita 1998). The butch/femme scale looks remarkably like the famed

work of Alfred Kinsey and the six-point continuum used to "measure" homosexuality and heterosexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard 1953). Zita questions the epistemology of a science that seeks to measure sexuality. She writes, "The validity of typing people into discrete categories was based on the belief that the Kinsey scale ratings do in fact measure sexual orientation (123)." Her work suggests that science tells us to expect that sexuality is measurable as types.

Zita argues that the modernist notion of positivism–an epistemological perspective that strives for validity and reliability in the search for an objective "truth"–seeks to "mak[e] desire measurable (123)." According to Zita, among other assumptions, modernist science makes the following presumption about sex research: "Sexuality is an object of knowledge and can be known pursuant to the right application of scientific and other methods of inquiry. This results in the positing of sex as a secularized epistemic object (129-130)." First, we understand sexuality as measurable, then we pursue its measurement. But this measurement requires a leap of faith according to Zita. She writes, "To conceive of sexual orientation as a specific phenotypic trait, one must first determine what aspects of sexuality seem observable and measurable and not so blended that they fail to make a significant difference in variation (122)." Presumed biological sex and sexual orientation are just such "differences" around which measurement appears to be warranted by positivistic science, and many have tried to measure them. Zita goes about the work of dismantling the positivistic search for a "gay gene" by Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland (1994).

The popular search for a "gay gene" or some biological basis for sex or gender follows the kind of research that modernist science regularly publicizes. It is not

coincidental that people debate in the everyday world about "choice" versus "nature" and attempt to apply some notion of scales. As Linde (1993) outlines, part of the sustenance of a coherence system is its use in common sense knowledge-building. Although Linde is concerned with a potential for misquoting the "scientists"–as at times am I–in this instance, the common sense knowledge of scales and measures follows very closely with the (however misguided) intent of many scientists. Many scientists begin with assumptions of concrete measurable sexuality and "real" biological difference based on orientation and presumed biological sex, such that the popular coherence of knowledge about gender now has a built-in expectation of some "real," measurable difference. Whether that difference is measured in hormones or dress size or amount of weight an individual can bench-press need not be a methodological concern for use in the everyday coherence system.

My point here is that lesbians should not be chastised for the existence of "the butch/femme scale," as silly as it may sound to an outsider. Science itself has given lesbians the notion of a scale. "Legitimate" science has given us the discourse of measurement and the notion of concrete truth. Lesbians speak only from the coherence system that is available in the scientific discourse on gender and sexuality. The discourse of heteronormativity has given lesbians the uneven playing field between butch and femme.

It is important to note that lesbians have attempted to draw the "butch/femme scale" as a horizontal–read egalitarian–concept (displayed below). Many of my narrators worked hard to convince me, and others in the discussion groups, that proponents of butch and femme do not see these identities as having unequal power. With all sincerity,

most of my narrators were willing to conceptualize the continuum as a wide range of possibilities and to be accepting of the self-proclaimed identities of others. They wanted to see the relationship of butch to femme in lesbian communities as a level playing field, a plethora of equivalent opportunities. I believe their efforts are sincere, and I support their political project of attempting to create egalitarianism. Indeed, it is my own.

The Butch/Femme Scale

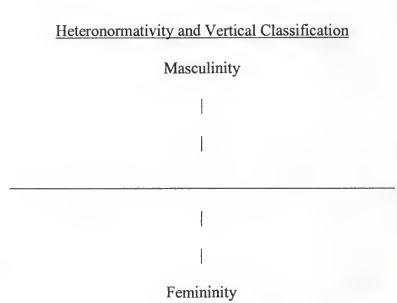
Femme Butch

0/1----------10

The difficulty in accomplishing this conceptualization is that the coherence system on which butch and femme are based–heteronormativity–is not a level playing field. A vast feminist literature has theorized and empirically-identified significant inequality in the heteronormative paradigm. (For a fine review of the literature, see Lorber 1994.)

Given the well-argued and empirically demonstrated existence of what might be termed patriarchy, the heteronormative "scale" might look something more like what I have drawn below.

Heteronormativity and Vertical Classification



Lorber (1993, 1994, 1996) argues that masculinity and maleness are so elided and understood to be so preeminent to femininity and femaleness in the heteronormative paradigm that no overlap on the scale is even available. Although the rhetoric of a "masculine side" and a "feminine side" are often put to use in everyday conversation, most individuals in practice conceive of maleness and femaleness as opposite, concrete and impermeable boundaries in the "real" world. Lorber (1993 and 1996) argues that, where demonstrable differences do not exist, boundaries *will be understood to exist* in order to maintain the gender order, and the gender order is always produced as a hierarchy.

My narrators identified the accountability that made them uncomfortable was the accountability to heteronormativity, not necessarily accountability to lesbian standards. One narrator began her interview with the notion of accountability to heteronormativity.

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): Most people automatically associate masculine/feminine with male/female, um, you know, male and "other." I don't think it's that. It's not a gender role. . . . I'm just saying that it can be reductively analyzed as masculine/feminine; but when I say

> masculine/feminine I don't think that that's male/female. Let's put it this way: I just want to dispel the stereotype of "butches just want to be men" and "femmes are lesbians who are trying to pass."(Ellie individual interview lines 53-73)

Some femmes complained that individual butches held them accountable to femininity standards that they felt were oppressive. For example, one narrator spoke about an ex-partner who she felt presumed a sense of superiority via butchness.

> Hope (42, medical field, does not identify): I think it should have been okay if she wanted to identify with butch, and it should be okay for her to do the grocery shopping [while] I did the lawn work. But it wasn't. She wanted to be in whatever role gave her the decision-making capability. She wanted to call the shots. (Hope individual interview, lines 62-65)

But, by a wide margin, my narrators agreed that relationships, such as the one Hope's former partner apparently wanted, were not acceptable. My narrators worked hard to separate butch and femme, as concepts in practice, from accountability to heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Unfortunately, as Cindy relates below, the standard to which butches are accountable is a heterosexual one.

> Cindy (25, student, does not identify): Well, I kind of agree that butch and femme to me mean more masculine and more feminine. But then, . . . I started thinking about how the line gets blurred. . . . the more masculine side isn't necessarily as encouraged.
>
> Sara: So you think that just not being feminine shows up more on lesbians?
>
> Cindy: I think not being feminine shows up more, the idea of not being feminine shows up more. But I don't think that everyone who looks masculine is more . . . I don't think that everyone who looks masculine wants to be a man. (Youth group 147-61)

Cindy speaks from experience when she reacts to the common presumption that simply not looking feminine implies one "wants to be a man." Primarily originating from a heterosexual audience, the accountability for "wanting to be a man" is accountability to heterosexual masculinity. The measuring stick is heteronormativity. And it is an

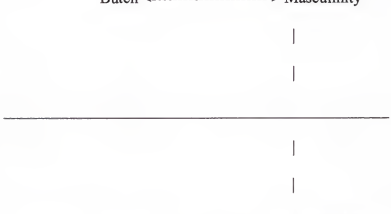
accountability that Cindy and others in the group wanted to avoid. Several group members explain the need to avoid accountability to heterosexual standards.

> Ellie (38, merchant, femme): [Relating a story about a particular occasion] this straight woman was bashing me for even being a femme, or even identifying as a femme. . . . [that] she was bashing me by reducing me to a social stereotype is how I took it, and when I talked about butch/femme, she automatically. . . she instantly went into the reaction of the gender construct, of the limitations. As a femme, I do not identify femme as being limited or having roles or anything else like that. It was her prejudice–that was my reaction. (Community group p. 4-5)

And later in the same conversation:

> Ellie (38, merchant, femme): Well, I'll tell you that in my last couple of relationships the change happened to be radically different. One was actually very shaming for being a femme and being challenged on it. Some were very patronizing, and some were very degrading: oh no, I can't row in a canoe because I'm a femme.
>
> Wanda (35, merchant, fast forward femme): Oh. Right.
>
> Ellie: I could row better than she could because I was stronger, and it really pissed her off, too, because I could lift more than she could, I could run longer and a lot of those other things, and that makes me Ellie, not a femme or a butch or anything.
>
> Terry (late 40s, professor, does not identify): You have to be a sissy in order to have a butch look at you. <laughs> Yeah.
>
> Ellie: But I was not going into that stereotype.
>
> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): That's why attaching feminine to femme and masculine to butch is bad. (Community group page 22)

In order for the coherence of butch and femme to fit the heteronormative paradigm, butchness is held accountable to masculinity whereas femmeness is held accountable to femininity. While, in some instances, butch and femme may be held accountable to each other, the overarching accountability is to the heteronormative model. The accountability might look something like the figure below.



Despite lesbians' best attempts to construe it otherwise, the system has little coherence without some reliance on the heteronormative paradigm. Again, I want to emphasize that lesbians need not be chastised for the system any more than any other group. Any inequality implicit in butch/femme is based on accountability to a heteronormative paradigm.

In sum, then, the "realness" of butch and femme derives not just from reiterative performativity and discourses, as Butler might suggest (1993, 1996). It also derives from well-practiced performativity gained from being *held accountable by others* to the rules and boundaries of masculinity and femininity. That is, it derives from discursive practice in interaction. What I am suggesting is that an ethomethodological approach must be added to any theory of discourse to fully encompass the production of reality. As Weston (1993) writes, "What this tendency to perceive gender as a physical property of possessions–or even as a product of the significance we culturally attribute to possessions–obscures is gender's character as an aspect of social relations (14)." She provides the final word as follows, "Gender no more resides in gesture or apparel than it

lies buried in bodies and psyches. ...*Social relations* are gendered, not persons or things (17)."

CHAPTER 5
"IT'S NOT THAT": THE (LIMITING) NARRATIVE ORGANIZATION OF BUTCH AND FEMME AS PRIVATE SELF

> Gendering is a metaphorical talk, my way to move you, your way to move with me, one of many asymmetrical languages for releasing sensualities into the grainy bareness of being. Playful perpetual asymmetries of power's pleasure. (Zita 1998:118)

All of my narrators were conversant in the language of butch and femme, but not all identified as butch or femme. Those who specifically identified themselves as butch or femme tended to understand it as an aspect of sexual self. Several narrators used the ideas of butch or femme as adjectives to describe appearance or performance of gender (i.e., "She's femme looking" or "my butch persona"). But those that described her total identification as butch or femme (i.e., as nouns, "I'm a butch" or "I am a femme") tended to consider it a sexual description of their most intimate self. Yet, there is a difficulty in expressing this intimate self, which lies in the insufficient language to do so.

In every instance of discussing butch and femme with other lesbians or in reading about theories of butch and femme, one specific theme is made clear: butch and femme are not the same thing as masculinity and femininity (Crawley 2001; Pratt 1995; Rubin 1992; Stein 1997; Walker 1993). Yet, in each instance, members tend to talk about the relationship of butch and femme to masculinity and femininity. Indeed, Rubin's (1992) definition of butch and femme–quoted in Chapter 1–is so useful because it mimics the talk of my narrators. The relationship between masculinity and femininity and butch and femme is a difficult one–especially for describing the private self. Discussing that

relationship invokes careful navigation through murky waters, and narrators often seem visibly pained by the difficulty in voicing what they describe as a clear difference.

In this chapter, I discuss the interplay of butch and femme in the production of private lesbian selves, especially as (gendered) sexual expression. In doing so, I explore the ways in which the language of sex is a very limited one. In the talk of my narrators, I found both reliance on heteronormativity and discursive resistance to it. Using analytic bracketing's (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) practice of first addressing "the whats," I begin this chapter by discussing the heteronormative discourses of sexuality–"Who's the man?"–that my narrators report hearing primarily from a heterosexual audience. I, then, address how notions of lesbian sexuality are textually produced in response to those discourses (i.e., "the hows"), as a means of resisting heteronormative speech and securing a sexual legitimacy. I return to the new discourses-in-practice used to portray a sense of lesbian sexual autonomy. I conclude by arguing that heteronormative discourses limit the ways in which sexuality can be imagined and described. Nonetheless, lesbians actively engage in narrative editing of those discourses in an attempt to broaden the ways that sexuality can be imagined and defended.

Sexual Stories : "What" We Begin With

(Hetero)Sexual Stereotypes: "Who's the Man?"

Discourses about sexuality in mainstream culture are so thoroughly saturated with heteronormativity that imagining sex taking place without men is apparently difficult. It is important to begin an analysis of lesbians' narrative organization of butch and femme by noting the mainstream discourses of sexuality to which lesbians must respond. Several narrators relate their frustration with being held accountable to the heteronormative sexual ideal by non-lesbian audiences.

> Faith (early 50s, merchant, does not identify but thinks others see her as femme): I think a lot of people assume that [if] you're in a lesbian relationship, you're either gonna be butch or you're gonna be femme. You're gonna be the man or the woman–the husband or the wife. (Faith individual interview lines 776-79)

Another narrator interprets heterosexual women's notions of "femme."

> Terry (late 40s, professor, does not identify): I wonder what straight women really do think about what [femme] is. Like you're a bottom or something?
>
> Ellie (42, merchant, Femme): Well, all that stuff that goes along with it. Submissive, the bottom, the one who is used to being penetrated, therefore the "other" and typical women's studies [stuff]; it's basically the female role of the "let's play who's the boy and who's the girl?" (Community group p. 5)

Many of my narrators of all ages and backgrounds answered to the sexual stereotype that one person in the couple had to be "the man," suggesting that what comprises lesbian sexuality is not widely understood. Butch appearance carries with it the sexual stereotype of attempting to be "man enough" and not having the necessary tools to succeed. Not only are lesbians held accountable to a heteronormative model of sex, but my narrators informed me that they often are called on to explain lesbian sex to a heterosexual audience.

> Sara: Do you think that lesbians get stereotyped into as doing butch and femme a lot?
>
> Cindy (25, student, does not identify): By other lesbians?
>
> Sara: …by people who are not lesbians.
>
> Winona (21, student, more femme): Definitely. You hear that all the time. "So which one's the guy?" [Lots of agreement] "Do you use strap-ons?" Or "why aren't you just with a guy if you use that?"
>
> Cindy : Or what we do isn't sex.
>
> Winona: Yeah, "How do girls have sex? Girls can't have sex."

> Cindy: "You don't have sex with each other." We don't have sex with each other. I don't know what we do, but we don't have sex. (Youth group lines 1299-1316)

And, in a separate interview:

> Sara: Are you concerned that people outside the lesbian community might apply those kinds of labels to you and your relationships?
>
> Vanessa (19, student, often seen as straightlooking): It bothers me all the time, like when Mindy [Vanessa's partner who does not identify but is often read as butch or lesbian] and I will be together and we'll be in a conversation; sex will come up, and they'll be like, "So I guess Mindy must be the man."
>
> Sara: And that's frustrating.
>
> Vanessa: Definitely. Because, you know, I don't think it has to be like that. In the straight community–I don't think butch and femme. I don't think people are as familiar with that.
>
> Sara: But they'd still want to know who the man is.
>
> Vanessa: They want to know how we have sex, you know. Stuff like that. I'm like, "How do you think?" You hear it all the time, though. It's like that's what people really want to know, especially straight men. Straight men are the worst. I remember one time Mindy and I had gone to see one of her old high school friends that she hadn't seen in a while in Colorado. She brought her boyfriend, and of course we didn't have boyfriend[s]. So we're sitting at [names the friend]'s house, and he just pops out, "I am *dying* to know. How do you two have sex?" We had never met this guy before. And we're like, "Well…"And then he would ask like other questions like, "Well, do you have oral sex?" He went really in detail, you know. And we're just like: "I'm not asking you how you have sex with your girlfriend here." And his girlfriend was very embarrassed. She was *so* apologetic. So I don't know. We do get that question a lot, though. (Vanessa individual interview lines 328-443)

There are two points of interest notable in these discussions. First, each set of narrators feels that butch and femme are understood–by a heterosexual audience–as specifically sexual concepts, not simply modes of dress. Second, each expresses a sense that they are held accountable to the heteronormative paradigm that sex requires only one "active" participant who would be understood as "the man" and one passive participant

who would be understood as "the woman." "Who's the man?" is widely familiar in lesbian communities as a heteronormative assumption about lesbian relationships (Wilton 1996). Several of my narrators referred to it in terms of intertwined assumptions about dress and sexual behavior.

In my own experiences, I have had to reiterate, particularly to heterosexual men, that, by definition, there are no men–no penises–in a lesbian relationship. For many men, this seems an amazingly difficult concept to master. I have had to explain that dildos, although common, are not necessarily a part of lesbian sexual repertoire, that dildos are not necessarily imagined as a penis, nor are they necessarily strapped on, and that my definition of lesbian sexuality did not involve "us showing his girlfriend a good time." I am continually amazed at the privilege that some men exhibit in expecting access to all sexual interaction.

Apparently, imagining sexuality outside a male-penis-penetrative/female-passive-receptive model proves difficult via mainstream sexual discourse. The heteronormative model is so androcentric that males and penises are always imagined as active (Bordo 1999) while females are merely present as recipients (Frye 1992). Indeed, the silence about vaginas is deafening (Ensler 1998).

Frye (1992) asserts that the word "sex" is so thoroughly a heteronormative concept, that it cannot be applied to lesbian intimacy. She argues that lesbians do not have "sex" and that what lesbians do suffers from a lack of language. Ultimately, her argument suggests, as a culture, we know little about how *women* experience sexuality. The sole reliance on a heteronormative model of sexuality and the accompanying lack of language for other possibilities proves very restrictive in the narrative organization of

private selves for lesbians. As I outline below, to make sexuality coherent, the model must be relied upon by lesbians but is also resisted and altered in the process.

Lesbian Sexual Stereotypes–"Tops" and "Bottoms"

Rather than speak in strictly heteronormative terms, lesbians tend to talk about sexual activity in terms of "tops" and "bottoms." Invoking the notion of one who is active–a "top"–and one who is acted on–a "bottom," this language creates a sense of opposites without specifically using heteronormative language–"the man" and "the woman." Nonetheless, it is based on a notion that only one person is active–or at least, only one at a time.

In the past, ideas of butch and femme implied a specific relationship to top or bottom in sexual terms–butch=top and femme=bottom (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). Some of my narrators discussed this concept and how it is changing.

> Sara: Do you think of butch and femme as particular ways in which to behave sexually?
>
> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): Can be, uh, I don't know. I don't think so. I think there's a lot of butch bottoms and all that…So, I don't think it's a way to behave sexually, necessarily. But I think that a lot of women think that, if they find a butch, they're going to find a top. And that's cool. I kind of like fulfilling that role. That's fun for me. So [laughs] . . . I'm happy about that. I'm cool with that. (Eli individual interview, lines 1804-20)

And, in a separate interview:

> Cathy (42, social worker, butch - 7): I had always thought that butch meant being on top. And in all of my sexual history, I had been on top. Well, it wasn't until I started dating women that were femme and top, within the last [several years], well before I met Wanda. So there was about a year, where I could only date the femme women. I just assumed that, if you were femme, you were bottom. In my sexual history, there wasn't butch and femme, but there was just an instinct towards top or bottom.

> Sara: An expectation or desire? In other words, was it sort of social, or something that you felt you just wanted to do?
>
> Cathy: I would have to say honestly that there was a degree of me that felt if you were butch, your role was to be on top. You were obligated to be on top.
>
> Sara: Partly expectation.
>
> Cathy: Right. But I know that's not true. I know that's not true in practice. I learned that that's not true.
>
> Sara: What do you mean it's not true?
>
> Cathy: Butch does not mean top. That does not mean top. But I know for me, I'm top. Bottom line, I've tried not to be, and it just doesn't work. (Cathy and Wanda interview page 21)

Butch and femme in these quotes are understood as potentially having some relationship to personal preference as top or bottom but not a direct and inflexible relationship. Notice in the last quote that she begins speaking in the negative–not what butch is but what it is not.

One of my younger narrators seemed to understand femme as a specific and restrictive sexual position.

> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify): I think I'm very demanding [in terms of sexual interests]. In fact, I can get to where I don't like people that are femme and submissive because *I'm not*. I'm like, "I want this. And I want it *like this*. And I wanna *try this*, and I wanna *do this*." I'll say what I want, you know. It's not that submissive thing at all. (Vanessa and Mindy couple interview lines 714-17)

But many narrators expressed the possibility of mixing the expectations to create butch bottoms and femme tops.

> Polly (mid 40s, computer professions, femme): I think social butch and femme and personal butch and femme are totally different things. I mean I know some women, when you meet them, you think, "Oh, she's butch and she's femme." But in bed it's the other way around–absolutely the other way around. The femme wants to be on top. (Polly individual interview page 7)

Though the language still implies an active participant and a recipient, flexibility is built in such that sexual interests are not necessarily gendered interests. Or, as the T-shirt said, one can be "Butch in the Streets, Femme in the Sheets." This notion of mixing sexual expectations was pervasive among my narrators. Most spoke of understanding that looks might be deceiving. Looking butch or femme did not imply the search for a sexual opposite or even a specific kind of private sexual self. Many narrators argued for the possibility of butch/butch or femme/femme relationships or that some butches could be bottoms and some femmes tops. Through mixing and matching, more possibilities are being understood among lesbians.

The language of top and bottom is one of the few public, directly sexual languages in lesbian communities that I found. The only directly sexual question that was asked during the butch/femme game was "Are you a top or a bottom?" Some implications of sexuality were made via humorous innuendos–for example, asking about "power tools," implying vibrators. But the only explicit language referred to "tops" and "bottoms." Additionally, answers were noticeably short. Either one aligned with one or a combination of these idenfitications ("I'm a top" or "I'm a butch bottom") or one eschewed the whole system ("I don't really identify with any of that."). There were few discussions at great length to describe what one engaged in sexually or how the language system did not describe some, more-detailed sexual interest.

As Frye (1992) argues, the language for lesbian sexuality seems relatively limited and generally insufficient to provide a detailed account of lesbian sexuality. It provides a sense of finite spoken possibilities. It continues to assume only one "actor" at a time, as opposed to imagining active positions for both (or more?) participants. Although the

language of butch, femme, top and bottom is mixed and matched to create new possibilities, lesbians operating outside this language seem to communicate a sense of common sense understanding about sexuality via assumptions about experience. If I call myself lesbian, other lesbians must know what I mean by "sex" even though we rarely share ideas about what comprises sexual acts. The language is lacking. Hence, my narrators often described the specificity of their private selves via a practice of producing related-to-but-different sexuality.

"The Hows"–Producing Related-To-But-Different Sexuality

In lieu of a specific and distinctively lesbian sexual language, many of my narrators described butch, femme and sexual attraction more generally in terms that borrowed from heteronormativity but were clearly distinct from it. They spoke in the negative–what it was not–in lieu of what it is. Additionally, they described a sense of origin or realness that seemed to preclude or defy explanation. Their stories implied, "Whatever it is, it's just in me." Discursive practices work around a system lacking specificity.

"It's Not That"–Inability to State Butch or Femme Specificity

When asked to tell what butch or femme means to them, many narrators began speaking about what butch and femme are not. They were heavily equipped with a sense of expectation, and they prepared first and foremost to refute stereotypes and stigmas. Relatively unsolicited, Ellie gives a classic response.

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): Most people automatically associate masculine/feminine with male/female, um, you know, male and "other." I don't think it's that. It's not a gender role. . . . I'm just saying that it [butch and femme] can be reductively analyzed as masculine/feminine, but when

> I say masculine/feminine, I don't think that that's male/female. Let's put it this way: I just want to dispel the stereotypes of "butches just want to be men" and "femmes are lesbians who are trying to pass."(Ellie individual interview lines 53-73)

Sandra gave a similar introduction in her individual interview.

> Sandra (age and occupation unavailable, butch lesbian):I am Sandra, a lifelong butch-identified lesbian, which does not mean that I would like to be a male. What it means to me is the way I approach life, the way I do seduction and the type of seduction I respond to. I like to wear a dildo at times when I am in public–it sort of completes my personna–and I like to use a dildo in my sexual play on my partner, never on me. ...I have always been butch. [I] have tried to not be, but it was almost laughable when I was doing that act. ...I do not walk like I have a brick under each arm, nor do I carry a wallet in my back pocket or walk like I have elephant nuts, or spit, or act tough, or dress like a male, although I believe all those behaviors are acceptable. ...I like femmes. They are a very strong attraction to me, and I love to be around them. If a butch comes on to me, it almost makes me laugh, and then I wonder why they would, unless, of course, they are a butch that is attracted to other butches. (Sandra e-mail 3/12)

Each of these introductions dives headlong into a discussion of what butch and femme "are not" before describing what butch and femme "are." Primed with expectations of my response or the readers' response, the next two narrators, in separate interviews, work to "dispel" myths from the very first step. Below, Eli attempts to describe her specificity as a "butch dyke" by using some relationship to heterosexuality, but immediately follows by disclaiming that relationship. In doing so, she also sets up the opposition between butch and "feminine" and a sense of depth or core identity.

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): Well, I guess, I'm more comfortable with my "male" side. I mean, I don't really think it's male. Maybe it's masculine, but it's that part of me that is not feminine. It's like the *not*-feminine is where I feel my groove. When I go out, I feel the most comfortable in my jeans and my boots and my leather jacket. And if I had to put on a dress and high heels, I would feel ridiculous. So, to me, it's a matter of dress, but it's more than that. It's like more core than that. [long pause] It's that tomboy thing. I'm kind of a boy in a girl's body, but I'm not a man, you know. (Eli individual interview lines 571-82)

Toward the end of Eli's description, it becomes clear how words that are necessary to make her self-description coherent ultimately fail. To be "kind of a boy in a girls' body" but "not a man" is as close as Eli can come to making us understand how she feels comfortable with herself. Below, over a rather protracted discussion, Karen uses the negative several times without ever resolving anything more specific about her butch identification. After several iterations of what she is not, she leaves you to understand she is simply "butch."

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): I have thought about the butch thing, you know what makes me butch. Is it the fact that I like to work with my hands? I like to build things; I like to fix things. Well, no! Not specifically. (Karen individual interview lines 439-40) …[Talking about attraction to femmes] So it's not even about that so much, and it's not about what they wear so much, but there's just, there's a sexual energy there and there's just an attitude that underlies it all. And the same thing is probably true of me. Where does my butchness come from? It's not simply about making things, and building things, and fixing things. It's not about how many power tools you have or want. It's not about being a motorcyclist. It's not about any of those things. But where does it come from? I don't know the answer to that. (lines 498-504) And this isn't a role that I'm playing. You know, I'm not a role. I am who I am and the category that I fit into is butch. So many people say, "I don't believe in the categories." And I used to be one of those people who said, "Don't put me in a little box. But being in a little box that has room to move around in is fine for me now. …Femme doesn't mean docile and passive and, "do everything for me." And butch doesn't mean the opposite of that, whatever that may be. You know the strong one–can't feel anything. So, yeah, I'm in a box, but it's a big box and I can change the dimensions of the box and I can add things to it or take things out of it. If I try on some aspect of the butch role and don't like it, well, then it's no longer part of me being a butch. Kind of amoeba like. But there's still–and this I think about–there's still some core there that everybody recognizes if they let themself. There's a core of what a butch is. There's a core of what a femme is. (lines 556-71)

After asserting in many ways what butch and femme are not and expounding on the flexible possibilities for each, Karen still understands them as having a "core" or

specific origin. They are at once not specific or definable yet emanating from somewhere within. Karen provides a similar description of her attraction to femmes.

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): I've always used the term "take charge femme," but that kind of misses a little bit of what it is that I'm attracted to because it isn't really just a woman who comes in and takes charge; it has to do with her confidence level. (Karen individual interview lines 389-92)

So, a certain specificity can be reached in creating a new notion of butch or femme–like the "take charge femme–but a protracted discussion based on heteronormative ideals followed by much qualification–" it is not that" –is first required in order to reach that specificity. A simple, concise language that is not based on heteronormativity is not available.

One group discussed the limitations of heteronormative language while engaging in producing what butch and femme are not.

> Christine (40s, occupation not provided, butch): [After discussing why using the words "masculine" and "feminine" can be problematic] But yet we still have these words that we use–"butch" and "femme." We don't say masculine and feminine. Why don't we say dominant and passive?
>
> Hope (42, medical field, does not identify): Because they have a heterosexual connotation.
>
> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): Just because it's so limiting. I mean there are tops who are femmes or butches. There are bottoms who are femmes or butches. I don't think that's mutually exclusive.
>
> Christine: I know. I was just saying about not using masculine and feminine because it was patriarchal.
>
> Ellie: But also to be a femme doesn't necessarily mean that you are submissive. I think that's what Wanda was trying to say.
>
> Wanda (35, merchant, fast forward femme): I can relate to that. I'm feminine, and I'm all about controlling my environment. (Communitygroup page 17)

This focus group spent the entire hour and a half attempting to define butch and femme, but produced no consensus. At the end of the discussion, they even discussed the possibility of consensus and allowing exceptions to the definition. Although many ideas about butch and femme were discussed, the image constructed about the phenomenon was largely shaped by ideas of what it was not or how certain definitions did not fit.

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): It's amazing that we can't definitively describe which person is femme, but I can walk up to most people and I can tell you butch, femme, butch, femme. I can tell you. (Community group page 13)

And later in the same interview:

> Cathy (42, social worker, butch - 7): If we took out the exceptions to the rule, we could probably have a better chance of coming up with the butch/femme definition. But every time we try to make a generalization, and everybody knows exactly what we're talking about, you come up with, "But I know somebody who..."
>
> Hope (42, medical field, does not identify): Is that because we're offended by the generalizations?
>
> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): Yeah.
>
> Cathy: I think there will always be exceptions to every rule.
>
> Polly (mid 40s, computer professions, femme): Is it a bell curve then?
>
> Christine (40s, occupation not provided, butch): I'm saying regardless of whatever we discussed here, all of us would be butch and femme, and we already have this idea or perception. Nevermind what it is, it *exists.* (Community group page 40)

This was not the only group of narrators to struggle with explaining what butch and femme are. Others struggled with the difficulty.

> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): That's what we were talking about in group. People were trying to define [butch/femme]. It reminded me of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, when they couldn't define a quality but everybody could recognize it. I mean, if you say it was a list of traits and you had to have, say, five out of ten traits be a qualified butch, you'd still miss the boat somehow.

> Sara: Cause that doesn't get it. It's not . . .
>
> Ric: Yeah, it seems to slip right through. [It's not] how you look or what you do or how you act sort of thing.
>
> Sara: It's a tough one, isn't it?
>
> Ric: Yeah. Yeah. (Ric individual interview, lines 586-612)

Polly, below, tries with some detail to describe the use of power in butch/femme but must still describe her ideas in the negative.

> Polly (mid 40s, computer professions, femme): I think it relates in some way to the butch-femme thing. It's not just, "Oh, I want to fuck you," you know. It's not that. It's "I want to share something with you and I want you to trust me." The thing about sitting [on the back of] the motorcycle is a classic thing. [It's saying,] "I trust you with my life," you know? That sort of thing. I think that's very classical butch and femme. It's that the femme is prepared to trust her vulnerability, giving it to you to look after, because she trusts your ability to look after it. And what happens when two come together and relate like that is to see the possibilities. It's exciting! It's exciting for me to give up my power. Because that's a femme thing, I think. It's like, not relinquishing your power. It's a temporary thing. It's exciting to me to trust you with my self. And it's exciting for the butch, or whatever, to think that this woman trusts me - to give me this power. (Polly individual interview page 27 lines 37-46)

The discursive practice of describing butch and femme in the negative–the "it's not that"–is probably the clearest illustration that butch and femme are not just one specific thing to be defined. They are narrative resources used in the service of storying lesbian selves. Judith Butler's (1990, 1993 and 1996) notion of performativity is best illustrated here. Butler sees all gender as a constant and repetitive imitation of an ideal that can never be met. Butler (1996) writes, "*…gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself (185, emphasis in original)." So, for Butler, gender is performative of an ideal that is itself non-existent. But, its constant imitation and reproduction becomes part of self and, thus, feels natural and

original. In this sense, Butler's notion of performativity is not theatrical, yet it illustrates the constructedness of gendered and heterosexualized discourses that produce subjectivities. It is important to note here that Bulter does not see performativity as apparent to individuals. It is precisely the performative, reiterative character of heterosexual masculinity or femininity or butch or femme that makes these identifications feel natural or biological. They become comfortable, real or true through practice.

The lack of language for lesbian sexuality and the pervasiveness of heteronormative discourses for sexuality, for all practical purposes, require a description that is both reliant on heteronormativity and resistant to it. Unfortunately, as Frye (1983) argues, this reiteration of heteronormativity gives it some sense of legitimacy. She writes, "The redundancy of sex-marking and sex-announcing serves not only to make the topic seem transcendently important, but to make the sex-duality it advertises seem transcendently and unquestionably *true* (29, emphasis in original)." My narrators did seem to seek a sense of truth or realness, which would preclude the need for explanation of butch or femme.

Sense of Realness or Origin

In order to avoid explaining specificity of butch or femme, many narrators sought to preempt explanation by providing an origin story or some sense of the "real" existence of self. Gendered interests or sexual attractions of the private self need no specific explanation if they simply exist. Several narrators feel a solid sense of realness or concrete quality to their identifications as butch or femme.

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): "I'd hate to think that all I have to do is for you to put on my clothes and for me to put on your clothes and, all of a sudden, I'm butch and all of a sudden, you're femme, because it is way much more that. You know, I would hate to think that it was just how we dress." (Ellie individual interview line 531-33)

And, in a separate interview:

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): [Responding to a proposal that in an ideal world, individuals could assume either butch or femme and then switch] I wouldn't want to be in world where it was play.
>
> Wanda (35, merchant, fast forward femme): Yeah, I wouldn't either. I was thinking the same thing. I was like, "No, no, I don't like that."
>
> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): My girlfriend was about to jump through that magazine rack there, going, "I don't think so."
>
> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): Don't even go there.

Several narrators explained their sense of self as originating before their adult selves were negotiated. Many sought biological explanations.

> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): When I was growing up, first of all, I hated dresses. When we were 4, my identical twin and I stood in the corner in nursery school and refused to play for a whole year, cause we were in a dress; and we flunked nursery school. I didn't identify as a girl back then. Neither of us did. When we were 3 or 4, somebody asked us what we were going to be when we grew up. We said, "We're going to be a policeman" or "We're going to be a fireman," and they said, "No, you need to be a policewoman," and we said, "No!" (Ric, individual interview, lines 853-78)

And, in a separate interview:

> Cathy (42, social worker, butch - 7): Since I was born, according to my parents, I have never liked girls clothes, never wanted to wear a dress, hated patent leather and buckles, hated the elastic straps that went into dresses, hated dolls. Give me GI Joe, give me the balls, give me the pants. A couple of years ago, my parents as a gift put all the kids' super-8 movies on video. I was watching it, and my girlfriend walked into the room. She said, "Who's that boy?" It was me. (Community group p. 3)
>
> Cathy: Maybe in 60 years they can do a blood draw, or do a test in-utero, and say, "You're going to have a girl, she's going to be straight, and she's going to be butch."–because I really believe so much of what we feel and how we act can be chemically altered. (Community group page 15)

And another:

> Sam (23, student, often perceived by others as butch): I think it might be worth mentioning some stuff from my childhood. When I was like 5 or 6

> years old, I tried to change my name. My legal name is [gives feminine-sounding name]–by the way. Um I haven't changed it yet. But anyway, when I was like 5 or 6 years old, I actually changed my name to PJ. And this was the way I identified; I didn't like girls' clothes. I refused to wear girls' clothes. I ran around without a shirt.
>
> Jo (19, student, Sugar Butch, Sam's partner): You didn't even wear a shirt.
>
> Sam: I didn't want to have a shirt on. The only reason I started putting shirts on is because all the neighborhood girls teased me *so badly*. It was *so painful* and embarrassing that I just conformed. But I told my parents. I was just like, "Call me PJ. That's my name." <giggling> And they never did it. It just didn't catch on. And then like a year later, I tried to change it to Spike. <laughter> And that was *really* a surprise. And then, I got old enough and came to college and I was just sitting in class one day and thought, "You know what? I'm a grown up. I could change my name." So I changed my name to something more suitable. <laughs>
>
> Wendy (23, corporate professional, says she looks "gay boy"): I think it fits you better.
>
> Sam: Oh, definitely. But it's really interesting though. I have this sort of gender dysphoria. (Youth group lines 1136-62)

Some stories were less specific to biological references.

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): Well, I've been a tomboy my whole life, so, before I identified as butch, I was a tomboy, you know. Until I was about 22 and came out and figured out I was a dyke, I didn't identify as butch; I was just a tomboy, you know. I didn't wear make-up. I always wore jeans and T-shirts. Basically, I was very much the same, except for I didn't have a label. (Eli individual interview, lines 531-35)

Others related social origins to being a "tomboy."

> Gilda (early 50s, occupation not reported, lesbian): Having grown up with four brothers, it was like I don't want to do the girls [stuff], you know, skip rope and play with dolls. (Terry and Gilda couple interview, page 5)

Like many narrators, Gilda referred to herself as a "tomboy" when younger and linked that youth to adult interests. Nonetheless, she also talks about initially not considering the possibility of attraction to women because of the social ideal that "opposites attract." But later she fell in love with a woman, which was "natural." So,

even narrators who discuss a sense of a social impact in sexuality, tend to revert to the "natural"-ness of the selves they perceive themselves to be.

Discussing a sense of realness was common to both butches and femmes among my narrators–even those who do not identify specifically as butch or femme but more generally as lesbians. However, origin stories were generally reserved for butches, not femmes. Perhaps, femme does not require an explanation of naturalness for gendered interests. Perhaps, the origin of femme is already understood to make sense in "women." Much like heterosexuals' normative gendered performances, femmes are less likely to be called upon to explain their lack of difference from the heteronormative paradigm.

As I argued in Chapter 4, lesbians alone do not deserve the critique for creating a sense of "real" sexual types. The most basic argument of queer theorists is that homosexuality as a "real," concrete identity that is separate and identifiable from heterosexuality (another "real," concrete identity) is a modern fabrication produced through the development of "moral" thought primarily during the 19th and 20th centuries (Foucault 1978, Kosofsky Sedwick 1990, Weeks 1981). Rather than view sexuality as a set of acts, it has become an identity–something that gives meaning to the person. The popularity of searching for sexual phenotypes that explain the "realness" of sexual attraction originates from that moral tradition via 20th century, positivistic science (Zita 1998). Critiquing modernist, positivistic research on sexualities, Zita (1998) explains how science can define the "reality" of (gendered) sexuality and define the parameters with which each of us are allowed to understand our bodies and describe our experiences. Zita points out a specific aspect to "scientific" presumptions about sex, and it illuminates why my narrators commonly conceptualize the search for an inner being. According to Zita,

among other characteristics, modernist science makes the following presumptions about sex research:

> Sexual desire is a significant truth of the body that is often hidden from view, held as a secret either consciously or unconsciously, and as a core constitutive secret it holds a central key in understanding a truth about the subject. This results in the interiorization of sex as the body's inner secret and its representation as a significant if not essential truth of the individual. (129-130)

Science, with a capital S, then becomes the basis for the coherence system that understands sexuality as innate and innately gendered. As a widely available coherence system, these ideas are put into use in the production of common sense knowledge by everyday lay persons (Linde 1993). If I feel comfortable with a particular type of attraction ("top" or "bottom") or sense of personal presentation ("butch" or "femme"), I locate it as coming from within *simply because of my affinity for it.* For, as science tells us, attraction and sexual presentations of self must originate in nature. Never mind that all fashion–that which is "pretty" (dresses) or "comfortable" (blue jeans)–is human made. Never mind that self presentation is practiced, developed and refined over years or decades. Never mind that much of my own comfort with self derives with the ways in which others hold me accountable to their standards of beauty and acceptability (West and Zimmerman 1983). Lesbians' discursive practice of citing realness or origins is based in the heteronormative, "scientific" coherence system that wishes to view sexuality, and in particular heterosexuality, as real, based in nature and inflexible.

Unfortunately, this continual reliance on heteronormative discursive practice is not likely to challenge the belief by many that heterosexuals "own" sex, gender and morally appropriate sexuality. Frye (1983) argues that heterosexual people specifically

ignore their own responsibility in putting heteronormativity at center. She discusses this at length as follows:

> It is wonderful that homosexuals and lesbians are mocked and judged for "playing butch-femme roles" and for dressing in "butch-femme drag," for nobody goes about in full public view as thoroughly decked out in butch and femme drag as respectable heterosexuals when they are dressed up to go out in the evening, or to go to church, or to go to the office. Heterosexual critics of queers' "role-playing" ought to look at themselves in the mirror on their way out for a night on the town to see who's in drag. The answer is, everybody is. Perhaps the main difference between heterosexuals and queers is that when queers go forth in drag, they know they are engaged in theater–they are playing and they know they are playing. Heterosexuals usually are taking it all perfectly seriously, thinking they are in the real world, thinking they *are* the real world. Of course, in a way, they are the real world. All this bizarre behavior has a function in the construction of the real world. (29, emphasis in original)

Although she speaks of "play," Frye has given us the key here to understanding the need for a sense of realness. The "role-playing" of heterosexuals is perfectly real, however constructed, in the "real world." Heteronormativity is taken to be real by the group that has the power to make it so–normative heterosexuals. Assuming the position of "normal," they hold the key to discourses to which all people are held accountable. Because gender and sexuality are parts of self for which we are all held accountable, the dominant discourse is very real in the everyday world and deserving of much attention by non-dominant groups. Lesbians answer to heteronormativity in very real ways–hence, lesbians' reluctance to understand their notions of gendered and sexual selves as "role-playing." Butch, femme or any combination of other identities is no less real for lesbians than the realness to which heterosexuals accord heteronormativity.

Frye, however, does lend lesbians and gay men a bit more credit than is due on an everyday basis regarding the awareness of drag. As real selves for which they will be held accountable, butch and femme were not regularly identified as gender drag in the

sense that Frye and other gender theorists (Butler 1990, 1993 and 1996) understand it. Certainly, my narrators were aware that there were performative aspects to their constructions of self, and they spoke very self-reflexively regarding the flexibility and inconsistency of appearance and sexuality. But it is still popular to look for an essential origin to self. An essential self could so readily excuse any personal responsibility for constructions of self for lesbians (or heterosexuals). But my narrators were very much aware of a need to change language and work to unsettle the heteronormative paradigm. They were quite aware of the need to change the discourse.

Feminist Narrative Editing–Changing the Discourses-in-Practice

This analysis may leave you with the unsettling feeling that heteronormativity is unavoidable and unchanged. Indeed, it may make you question what exactly is *lesbian* about butch and femme? How are butch and femme different from masculinity and femininity?

Through the process of composing a self, a member uses several narrative tools (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Possibly most artful about members' construction of self is the process of narrative editing–members' active retelling of a familiar tale. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) write, "[People narrating self] needn't reproduce particular coherences, even if there are local imperatives suggesting that they do so, although storytellers are accountable for veering off locally preferred courses (113)." Butch and femme edit heteronormativity by breaking its first rule–the imperative for opposite-sex coupling (Butler 1993, Case 1989, de Lauretis 1994).

Fortunately for lesbians, occupying non-normative sexual status provides an opportunity to narratively and interactionally edit heteronormative notions of the private self. Whereas the rules of heteronormativity may be difficult to break free of for people with normative sexual interests, simply presenting oneself as lesbian allows for or, should I say, practically requires one to narrate a non-normative story of self. As the selves of lesbians are storied, there are limited narrative resources from which to borrow. But they are free to use those coherent resources in new and flexible ways that attempt to restory sexuality to include lesbian experiences as normative.

Encouraging Flexibility and Accepting Difference

Many of my narrators quite self-consciously spoke in terms of creating flexibility for woman and creating egalitarian relationships. Ellie, below, specifically identifies this flexibility as feminist.

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): One of the neat things about being a lesbian, and any feminist in fact, is that those roles are not real rigid; they're fluid. I can be very femme but I also have more tools than my girlfriend, who's very butch and I know how to use them and she doesn't. (Ellie individual interview lines 159-62)

One focus group began with the notion that how they discuss butch and femme is situational and contextual. They are aware that audience and situation change how they present the ideas of butch and femme.

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): If I'm at work and somebody at work says something about butch something-or-other, then I'm going probably to a different place than if I'm here and someone starts talking about butch something-or-other. The context is important to me. And it even changes. If I'm with one group of lesbians as opposed to a different group, it would change as well, or at least my reaction to it would change. (Community group p. 2)

They spoke about context in terms of guarding the possibility that butch and femme might be understood reductively as heterosexualizing or misunderstood as a specifically orchestrated inequality.

> Wanda (35, merchant, fast forward femme): For me, being femme is about. . . the way I like to look, which of course carries over directly to the bedroom. You know, how you want to look, how you want to play the game. You know, how seductive you want to be. And that's where it gets convoluted because there are so many different kinds of femme. Some femmes are the ones that want to sit on the barstools and want you to come to them and seduce them and buy them drinks. And then there's me. I don't necessarily want to wait for anything at all. I don't want to wait to be seduced. I don't want to wait to be invited. I don't want to wait to be approached. (Cathy and Wanda interview page 23)

In particular, femme is often described explicitly as a sexual expression or active sexual interest. This concentration on active, sexual femininity is offered as a counter to understanding feminine bodies as incapable or passive. The concentration on sexuality itself is designed to edit femininity. One group discussed this in detail.

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): I guess what Wanda was trying to say is that you can be a femme and still be strong. You know, you can be a femme and still be the one with the power tools. ..
>
> Hope (42, medical field, does not identify) and Terry (late 40s, professor, does not identify): Yeah.
>
> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): Yeah, I agree with that.
>
> Karen: And to me, that's where it breaks away from being feminine, because the picture of feminine is, you know (in falsetto voice), "Can you do this for me, honey?"
>
> Hope: Yes.
>
> Karen: Yeah. I disagree with that completely. That's not what femme is, not to me and certainly not for most of the femmes I know. The butch/femme thing is not about who's stronger and who's in charge.
>
> Wanda (35, merchant, fast forward femme): Because I'm like, "Move over. Let me do that."

> Karen: One of the types of femmes that I'm attracted to is the take-charge femme, and she does exactly what it sounds like. I think that's where it's separated from the masculine/feminine, because we're all women. None of us want to be viewed as weak–[as though we] can't do anything for ourselves. (Community group page 37)

The innuendo of the take-charge femme, to whom Karen is attracted, is a specifically sexual concept. Karen's narrative editing of femme includes envisioning women in an active sexual position–not submissive and receptive, but taking charge.

Changing the heteronormative goal of oppositional relationships is a form of narrative editing. Under the heteronormative paradigm, the icons of masculinity and femininity are established as polar and binary (Lorber 1993, 1994 and 1996). They are envisioned as opposites with no overlap in gendered interests or sexual desire. The same is not true for my narrators' understanding of the goals of producing butch or femme selves. As they suggested above, gendered interests are not necessarily linked to sexual desire, and the desire for an opposite is not necessarily bound up in seeking an unequal relationship. Indeed, most of my narrators encouraged a sense of butch or femme that was not on the extreme end of the scale–1 or 10. Instead, a more midrange goal was often understood as preferable. Or, if a more "extreme" persona were to be presented, it would be permissible as an erotic identity, but not as chauvinism or an attempt to play into dynamics of inequality. Recall that when I was judged an 8 by the butch/femme game, I was *not* given a higher score specifically because I displayed "positive" traits such as smiling or being playful with my partner. Apparently, to have scored me higher might suggest some concern that I intend to oppress a partner.

Narrative editing involved all kinds of possibilities beyond just butch and femme. The expansion of possibilities was striking. Wendy, below, moves out of the realm of lesbians to describe herself as "gay boy."

> Wendy (23, corporate professional): A lot people call me a little "gay boy," you know, like in a woman's body. Because I tuck my shirt in [and] I shop at Structure or Gap on the guys' side. (Wendy individual interview lines 63-5)
>
> [Later, after having described her youth as a tomboy]
>
> Sara: It's kind of interesting to me that gay boy isn't butch. There's something different between butch and gay boy.
>
> Wendy: Because I guess when you think of gay boy, you think of feminine–a touch of femininity. I mean it's funny to think I hate getting my hands dirty; I will if I'm prepared for it, but if I'm all dressed and just ready to go, I won't be the one fixing the car or changing the tire. I do open doors for girls, but I open doors for anybody. So I don't know, I guess there's a lot more to explore. (Wendy individual interview lines 203-11)

Indeed, there is a lot more to explore. Adding to the repertoire of butch and femme, I noted "sugar butch," "power femme," "fast forward femme," "granola," "lipstick lesbian," "fag," and "boy," just to name a few. Inventing new names was common and often understood as entertaining or humorous–an endearment. The proliferation of possibilities seems almost endless. As one narrator describes, the coherence system may rely on a scale or continuum or spectrum, but "I think of it as a very wide, wide, wide spectrum (Martha, 46, social worker, does not identify, Club group lines 22-23)." So, reliance on a conceptual coherence system does not require a sense of being restricted to using its original rules.

Additionally, an interesting paradox among my narrators emerged by age. Most narrators who specifically identified as butch or femme were older than 30. Most under 30 did not identify as butch or femme. Yet, many of my narrators under 30 dressed in ways that cause others to identify them as butch or femme. That is, they looked butch or femme in presentation although they did not accept those identities for themselves. Indeed, I expected much more identification with butch and femme among younger

narrators and found that expectation to be exactly backward. So, it is quite possible to present the physical appearance of what might be identified as butch or femme without accepting them as identity. Hence, performance can be separated from a sense of inner, private self. I will address this paradox at greater length in Chapter 6.

Sexual "Energy" and the Importance of Naming

In changing the discourse of gender and sexuality for lesbians, many narrators consistently described butch and femme as a sexual "energy." Using concepts that invoke an ethereal sense of a force or attraction, they spoke of butch and femme in explicitly sexual terms.

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): The best I've been able to come up with after several discussions is it's an energy, and then it manifests itself in various ways, in various degrees.
>
> Terry (late 40s, professor, does not identify): On a continuum.
>
> Karen: Yeah.
>
> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): Identifying it is possibly directed to accessories that can help outfit it. <laughs>
>
> Wanda (35, merchant, fast forward femme): Ellie! <laughs> (Community group page 13)
>
> Karen: But there's sexual energy, I think, between butches and femmes.
>
> Ellie: Thank God. Why come out? (Community group page 14)

In a separate interview reflecting by herself, Karen goes into greater depth:

> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): I don't know if I call them femmes because I was attracted to them, or if I'm attracted to them because they have that femme energy. For me, it's all about an energy–an attitude more than it is about anything else. You know I really . . . it's just so hard to put into words, anymore than I can say what a butch attitude is, but I sure point them out. You know and I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt I'm a butch. There's no femme in me. (Karen individual interview lines 411-16)

In a different group, Dana spoke about butch and femme attraction in a similar way.

> Dana (47, health professions, butch): It has to do with sexuality and sexual dynamics within a lesbian relationship–who we partner with sexually, who we are drawn to, this energy that is complementary, one to the other as far as our sexual selves.
>
> Martha (46, social worker, does not identify): When you say sexuality, are you talking about sexual performance of the act or just the energy, the drive, you know, who you are attracted to, who you're…
>
> Dana: I think mostly its about who you are drawn to, who you create sexual energy with, that may then be reflected in the act, actually being sexual, but not necessarily.
>
> Nancy (41, health professional, does not specifically identify): Do you think that it has more, like if one person is more on one end of a spectrum, the other is drawn to them? Is that what you think?
>
> Dana: Yep, yep.
>
> Sara: So you see them as pretty relational.
>
> Dana: Um, yeah, I do.
>
> Sara: Or because you've seen it play out that way among people that you know.
>
> Dana: Yeah, and I don't think it's an absolute. I think that there's what I would identify as butch being attracted to butch and femme being attracted to femme. But I think, like Kathie said, there's degrees of where we are on the scale of butch/femme, but you know degrees. It's that difference in attraction for one another. (Club group, lines 51-75)

Yet another, separate narrator talks about butch and femme as sexual energy.

> Sandra (age and occupation unavailable, butch lesbian): I can only speak for myself about this subject, but for me, my degree of sexuality is directly and strongly related to my self image. I enjoy the feeling of being seductive and bold in a way that femmes are attracted to. Even when I'm in a committed relationship, there is that *energy* that emanates from me. It is who I am, first and foremost, then the other aspects of my self follow. Yes, I believe that femmeness is the result of very similar self identity. I also believe that lesbian sexual identity cannot be defined by behavior. There are players who have femme/femme relationships that are successful. There are butch/butch relationships that are successful. There

> are androgynous relationships that are successful. (Sandra e-mail 3/18, emphasis added)

Each of these narrators speaks about definitive attraction in somewhat ethereal terms. The attraction is clearly there yet so difficult to conceptualize, according to my authors. The use of the concept "energy" is interesting. It suggests something palpable and measurable, like electricity, but still not visible or definable in concrete terms. One colleague reminded me that the metaphor of physics can be called up with the term energy. In physics, the principle of energy is that it can never be created or destroyed, only transformed.[18] As a metaphor of physics, energy as sexual attraction provides the image of dynamic power that is shared and exchanged.

In addition to "energy," many narrators spoke in terms of "yin/yang," within one person as well as between two people. Also an ethereal concept drawn from Eastern religions, yin/yang provides the metaphor of complementarity or fulfilling something missing. It is the notion of wholeness and balance. Taken together, they provide a notion of dynamic equality–of both electricity and balance.

Why Reiterate Butch and Femme?

About the time I began to understand what my narrators were trying to portray via these metaphorical concepts of energy and yin/yang, I began to notice that the narrators who are committed to butch and femme as key identifications of self are working very hard to justify those concepts. The commitment to them runs deep. What had perpetually bothered me was why. Why keep reclaiming butch and femme? Why work at it so hard, finding just the right metaphors to diffuse the stigma and reinvigorate a sense of

[18] Thanks to Aurora Morcillo for reminding me of this concept.

complementarity? I found the key in the importance of naming sexuality. My narrators discuss it as producing a sense of overt sexuality for butches and femmes.

> Cathy (42, social worker, butch - 7): In my experiences of having had sex butch and femme, it's far more exciting with the opposite.
>
> Karen (42, Ph.D. student, butch): Yeah, but what's your opposite?
>
> Cathy: Femme. It's far more exciting, that chemistry, that energy with femme, with having that opposite, as opposed to having something similar. (Community group page 24)

Reflecting on the deepest, inner understanding of self, Ric says:

> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): [Talking about why it was only recently that she assumed butch as an identification] When she kissed me, it was like I woke up. It was like, "Oh this is what I've always wanted–a femme in a dress with lipstick." It was like so hot, the ice melted. And there were other girls in my past that wore skirts, but I didn't get it. It was *because* [names past girlfriend] identified as femme." (lines 282-84, emphasis added) [Explaining why she didn't identify before] People weren't like talking, naming it, they didn't name it, and so it was almost like it had less power because it wasn't named." (Lines 274-5) This is part of me that I never had a label for. I think it's a coming out sort of thing–you recognize something in yourself and go, "Oh, this is me, and this isn't bad after all." I knew I was more masculine than a lot of people, but I didn't name it anything.
>
> Sara: Right. So the value is really in naming it.
>
> Ric: Or recognizing it. Yeah, there is some value in naming it because I had dated those other girls who wore skirts, but I couldn't put it together that that's the kind of girl that I want. Some of it had to do with self acceptance. I like me better. I like myself better now. (Ric individual interview, lines 630-670)

In a separate interview, Eli offers an equally poignant reflection.

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): [Referring to butch/femme] it has a lot to do with sexual energy–like sexuality, like attraction–and I just think it's really hot [laughs]. To have that dynamic of like opposing, you know, like north and south, opposites. That's hot to me. That's a big turn on.
>
> Sara: Like in terms of sexual interplay? In terms of expectations in bed?
>
> Eli: Right.

> Sara: Do you think that sexual energy has a lot to do with that sort of sense of self? Earlier you were talking about this sort of core idea, "This is how I feel."
>
> Eli : Mm, hmm. When I was growing up, I *guess* I presumed I was heterosexual, you know. I never thought I was gay, but I wasn't very sexual through high school. Normally people are getting laid and stuff, but not me. [laughs] I'm not interested. I did think there was something wrong with me, like "Why am I not sexual at all?" So I'm going through college, thinking that I'm heterosexual. I had my time in heterosexual land, and it was not good. When I came out and discovered my sexuality, being a dyke, that's when I really kind of found my ego, had my confidence, and, became like really attracted to somebody else. That really feels nice to get turned on to somebody else, you know. You became who you are. When I thought I was straight, there's no way anybody was actually attracted to me, you know. They might want to fuck me, but they don't necessarily think that I'm sexy. You know what I mean? To actually be the object of somebody's desire is kind of a nice thing. Maybe I'm not sexually attractive as a heterosexual but that's okay, cause that's not who I should be, you know what I mean? So, it's really sweet to be in a place where people think you're attractive, you know. (Eli individual interview, lines1783-1961)

The attraction of opposites is a way of achieving, not just complementarity, but also a sense of sexual attractiveness to others–which both Ric and Eli explain is not a given in a heterosexual paradigm. Butches can step outside the expectations established for female-bodied people and find partners who are attracted to them as strong, aggressive women. Butch and femme are ways of asserting overt sexual self to potential partners and to self. As Ric and Eli both relate, they like themselves better when they feel a sense of being attracted to and being attractive to particular types of partners. Ric suggests the naming of that attraction gives it existence and power.

If Frye's (1992) argument that lesbians do not have "sex" (because the notion of sex is so thoroughly infused with heteronormative meaning) holds weight, then butch and femme as names for sexual self provide some way to assert sexuality for lesbians. It provides a language of lesbian sexuality that Frye has argued was missing. Further, the

sexuality of butch and femme is an overt sexuality–one that can be advertised via appearance. Ultimately, butch and femme can be understood as challenging heteronormativity in the sense that it works to build overt sexual possibilities for women (Wilton 1996). Wilton (1996) writes:

> Given that that doctrine of heteropolarity proscribes the very idea of female sexual agency, that sexual drive is located in and defined by masculinity, and that heteropolar femininity consists in the 'dissimulations of a fundamental masculinity' (Butler 1990:53), butch and femme lesbians do, indeed, offer a most potent challenge to its coherence. It is essential to deconstruct the gender and erotic fictions of heteropolarity, to disengage notions of strength, weakness, submissiveness and agency from gendered bodies. In order to do that, we must dispense with the essentialism which sees penetration, role play, etc. as inherently heterosexual, i.e., gendered. (140)

Performance of self is not just in the physical presentation of bodies but also the naming of those concepts. As I discussed in Chapter 3, performativity is also citationality–the reiterative citing of notions that speaks the "reality" of themselves into existence (Butler 1993). Butler writes, "The norm of sex takes hold to the extent that it is 'cited' as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels (13)." Butler's overarching argument is that bodies/matter are *understood* to be sexed differently. But the body does not precede that understanding, nor does the understanding precede the body. The matter of sex and the symbolic understanding of it emerge together through a continuous process of citing the difference we refer to as sex. It is this continuous process of citation of difference that produces our understanding of difference. Our understandings of difference shape our behavior, which shape our bodies, which shape our understandings of difference–not in a cyclical pattern but in reiterative, uneven, cited, practiced, perceived, lived interactions. Hence, the reiterative citing of butch and femme as sexuality for lesbians creates their reality in discourse.

But why do lesbians create butch and femme so similarly to heteronormativity? Butler argues that performativity via citationality requires a reference to the dominant discourse in order to provide coherence. What Butler (1996) calls "regulatory regimes" are parallel to Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) discourses-in-practice. They exist in the everyday and have real consequences. Butler sets up the defining question about lesbians' resistance of regulatory regimes:

> It is one thing to be erased from discourse, and yet another to be present within discourse as an abiding falsehood. Hence, there is a political imperative to render lesbianism visible, but how is that to be done outside or through existing regulatory regimes? Can the exclusion from ontology itself become a rallying point for resistance? (185)

As Butler implies, it is the production of typically atypical selves through discursive practice and physical performativity that offers women with non-normative sexual interests a space to understand their experiences. The discursive practice of citing butchness or femmeness as one typical form of lesbian gendered and sexual experience is a means of producing space for the existence of lesbians in the dominant discourse. But they derive their meaning through the coherence of heteronormativity. Apparently, the simple reference to "lesbians" does not call up sexual meaning to a heterosexual audience resulting from a lack of language for women's sexuality. There is no coherence of women's active sexuality via the heteronormative paradigm. Instead, butch and femme first reference coherent heteronormative discourses–a sense of "opposites attract"–then change the discourse to include only female-bodied people. In this way, butch and femme as gendered sexual identities are produced through the coherence system of patriarchal heteronormativity (not as imitations as many theorists have assumed, but as co-productions), in order to contest the lack of sexual identities allowed women. Butch and femme as lesbian gendered sexuality may be viewed as a means to contest male

hegemony and to gain discursive space for lesbians in the production of ontology. That is, they work to change the discourse from within. The question is whether it is necessary to change the discourse from within.

Heteronormativity and the Lacking Erotics of Sameness

The impact of institutional heteronormativity is most deeply felt at the level of understanding and imagining one's private, even sexual, self. Heteronormativity prescribes an erotics of opposites while proscribing any other combination. The discourse not only promotes the naturalness of opposites; it preempts imagining sexuality in any other way. There is no discourse for sameness or turn-taking or anything other than an active/passive combination. It is based on a metaphor of physics: "Opposites attract." Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors define much of the basis for our everyday understandings of the world. They write, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (5)." "Opposites attract" is a powerful metaphor. It produces the notion of a "natural" law–something powerful and beyond human control. As a law of physics, it is neatly predictable and invariant. Additionally, it is polar and complementary–encouraging individual extremes (i.e., masculinity is everything that is not femininity taken to the nth power) and creating a sense of need for the opposite to create stability and reduce potential cataclysmic reaction if not coupled. The metaphor is a powerful one. Lakoff and Johnson explain:

> Ontological metaphors like these are so natural and so pervasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena. The fact that they are metaphorical never occurs to most of us. We take statements like 'He cracked under pressure' as being directly true or false. (28)

Heteronormativity is taken as self-evident. It is understood as the only choice for a safe and balanced division of sexuality–and labor. Yet, metaphors are not just words.

Foucault (1972) suggests that discourses are always anchored in institutions. He argues that the materiality of discourses derives from their everyday support and reinforcement through practices witihin institutional settings. Clearly, heteronormativity is institutionalized in law via legal marriage, rights to adoption, rights to inheritance, rights to insure health care for partners and families, practices for health care surrogacy, and tax and real estate law. Indeed, as the threat of legal same-sex marriage loomed in Hawaii in the late 1990s, a majority of U.S. states ratified Defense of Marriage Acts (DOMAs) to secure the preserve of legal marriage for "one man and one woman." Additionally, heterosexual models for relationships run rampant in mainstream, mass media, selling the virtues of "opposites attract" in so many ways.

The use of heteronormative discourses in the structuring of institutions secures the "realness" of heteronormativity for heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. Both the material effects of institutions on life experiences and the everyday language used and produced through them provide the vehicle for understanding self and construct the critical means to convey sexual possibilities for personhood. Clearly, mass media and law, among others, have an enormous impact on the use and development of everyday language and the production of everyday coherences. The lack of discourse for anything other than heteronormativity has constrained the possibilities for selves that might otherwise describe the egalitarian sexual self for many lesbians. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, "In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept, a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that

metaphor (10)." Indeed, Jeffreys (1996) has argued that the institutionalizing of heteronormativity has preempted the possibility of envisioning an erotics of sameness.

Some of my narrators shared their inability to conceptualize an erotics of sameness. Although they sought to understand it as possible, they seemed to have difficulty conceptualizing it.

> Sara: Can you have two butches?
>
> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): Oh yeah, I guess. I don't know . . .
>
> Sara: It's hard to imagine?
>
> Ric: Yeah.
>
> Sara: More problematic to imagine?
>
> Ric: It's almost like if you put two butches together, they become both androgynous; but if you put two femmes together and if they're high femmes–which for me are people like [names local lesbian] and [names local lesbian] and my girlfriend, who wear skirts and hose and lipstick and you know it's not just dressing up; it's a whole attitude–so if you put two femmes together and they happen to be doing the femme-on-femme thing, they would still be two femmes.
>
> Sara: If you put two butches together, they stop being butch.
>
> Ric: Yeah, because they seem androgynous to me. I don't know why I think that. (Ric individual interview, lines 193-213)

The concept of "androgynous" lesbians was common among my narrators. It is often used to describe women who choose not to look stereotypically feminine–like "women"–but they are not understood as butch. On the scale, they might be understood as in the middle. Interestingly, once one moves from the butch category to the androgynous category, a sense of active sexuality is lost. You sort of move from specifically "butch" to generically "lesbian." The couple below, who do not specifically identify as butch but are often understood to be a butch/butch couple, talk about that problematic.

> Sam (23, student, perceived by others as butch): I still perceive us as being a cute little butch couple. But it mainly has to do with the haircuts I think.
>
> Sara: I was wondering if you thought or felt like you had some reaction to you as a butch/butch couple, because so far I haven't heard either of you say, "I feel butch" or "I think I'm butch."
>
> Jo (19, student): We don't have any of that, though.
>
> Sam: Who the man is or the woman is. Well, actually, people have asked me that. It's like they think of us as being like two positives together or two negatives together or something. They can't imagine how [we can be together]. (Sam and Jo couple interview, lines 1124-35)

Notice that Sam talks about understanding them as a couple appearing like "a cute little butch couple" while Jo assures us there is no specific sexual implication in their appearance. But Sam responds by noting that others seem to have difficulty imagining that sexuality in any form. Although appearance and sexuality are unproblematic for Sam and Jo as a couple, others seem to have difficulty with the incoherence of sameness together.

One of my narrators brought to my attention that many couples "look alike," although curiously there is not much public discussion of this form of coupling. In my own experience, I have known several couples who look more alike than opposite. Indeed, older heterosexual couples are commonly discussed as starting to act and look alike as they age. Surely, this does not meet the paradigm that opposites attract. I began asking my narrators about couples that looked alike. Most narrators stated knowing "that kind of couple," almost as though it were a "type." Some narrators had names for this "type" of couple, based on sameness or likeness. They were called "twins" or "twinzees." One friend referred to them as "twinkies." I asked her what she thought twinkies referred to. She replied, "Two of the same thing in the same wrapper."

Apparently, this "type" is commonly known but much less commonly referred to in conversation than, for example, butch or femme. Some narrators explain specific interests in looking for commonality.

> Wendy (23, corporate professional, often called "gay boy"): I wouldn't be with somebody because they're feminine or because they're butch. I would date someone if we have something in common. (Wendy individual interview lines 70-2)

And, in a different interview:

> Terry (late 40s, professor, does not identify): But you know that what you were talking about when you first started feeling attracted to women was the likeness. And that really hit home with me. Because the more I thought about it, the more therapy I had being married for nine years, was that what I was attracted to was the female in my husband–the feminine qualities. And my girlfriends used to say, when I was dating him, that he was like one of the girls. And that never dawned on me, oh gee, that's why I love him so much! I think that was a very compelling thing that you just said about [likeness], and making that connection. What's wrong with liking somebody like you; isn't that an affirming thing? (Terry and Gilda couple interview, page 19)

Gilda relates that she was drawn to likeness but less aware of that interest until it was brought to her attention–both by her friends and by me in the interview. Indeed, having "something in common" is a standard criteria for mate selection among heterosexuals and lesbians alike, yet it is rarely discussed in the discourse of opposites attract. The inconsistency is glaring but ignored. Some narrators even talked about identical mate selection as a problem. It might involve "narcissism" or "not being free to be an individual" or "losing your identity" (Ellie, individual interview lines 423-25). The discourse of heteronormativity discourages the recognition of likeness, even where it exists.

Many of my younger narrators suggested that coupling without a sense of opposites is more common today.

> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify): Now I think actually two people who look butch pair up, or two people who look femme, so there's a lot more crossing. So it doesn't have as much *meaning*, in that aspect that it used to. (Vanessa and Mindy couple interview line 259-61)

Others talked about a sense of sexuality that was not specifically identified as giving or receiving. They termed this sexuality "switch."

> Sam (23, student, perceived by others to be in butch/butch couple): One of the things that I really love about the dynamic that we have (Jo, her partner: nervous giggles) is that we are *very switch*. Very compatible–with a wide variety of life. I would be bored to death if I was only able to be masculine or feminine or she was always feminine or masculine to me. That would bore me to tears. (Sam and Jo couple interview lines 1312-19)

Another narrator talked about "switch" in the sense that one changes back and forth in order not to be held publicly accountable to one identity. It is a specific sense of disrupting heteronormativity.

> Louise (32, student, femme dyke): Well, I like the switch thing because I don't necessarily think there are two, genders, or two types of women, or two types of lesbians. That category or that type of person I see as being a very empowering identity, because again, it causes people to think maybe twice about what they thought before. And I think the only way people are going to evolve. Is to consider a different option and not feel threatened by it and think, "Well that might be okay." (Louise individual interview, lines 828-47)

Louise outlines even further possibilities for disrupting heteronormativity:

> Louise (32, student, femme dyke): Now there's this phenomenon. And it's always been around I'm sure. You know the butch girls want to date each other. The *fag* thing is happening now, which you know totally makes me go back to feeling how I felt when I was a teenager and all my friends were *fags*. I found them attractive and sexual and fun, and yet, I was never gonna get any cause they were gonna want to sleep with each other. (Louise individual interview, lines 1311-26)

Certainly, the possibilities among the younger narrators seemed much broader than standard notions of butch tops and femme bottoms.

In "Thinking Sex," Rubin (1984) calls for us to imagine what she calls "benign sexual variation." She writes:

> It is difficult to develop a pluralistic sexual ethics without a concept of benign sexual variation. Variation is a fundamental property of all life, from the simplest biological organisms to the most complex human social formations. Yet sexuality is supposed to conform to a single standard. One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way. (15)

How might we choose to story discourse differently? My first choice would be to remove any metaphors to nature. The notion of sex as natural removes any responsibility for the actor in making sexual choices (Whisman 1996). Desire need not be accessible only because "we can't help ourselves." I desire to go waterskiing. It makes me feel good. I don't know why. But it is the most unnatural activity that I can imagine. No one, except maybe environmentalists, criticizes that desire or calls it unnatural. It is accepted as simply an enjoyable activity. We need a discourse of sexuality that encourages that kind of pursuit of happiness.

What metaphor might we want to use to encourage erotic independence and positive sexual activity? The notion of sexual "energy" might be a good one. It implies something productive and upbeat, almost kinetic. A notion of personal "yin/yang" might also work. It might encourage an erotics of sameness, in which each person is understood as complete and not requiring a complementary other to fulfill itself. I think the possibilities could be vast. We need to put more metaphors into practice.

In sum, the language of butch and femme as private self is so difficult to produce because it requires heteronormative discourse to grant its coherence. No other language for sexuality exists except the heteronormative paradigm. As such, the language of lesbian sexuality is limited and often spoken in terms of what it is not. Nonetheless,

lesbians actively edit the limiting narrative. They produce coherence and then immediately edit its simplicity. By introducing new ideals of self-presentation and working to speak a new language of sexuality, lesbians actively resist the limitations of the heteronormative paradigm.

Yet, there remains a need to name sexuality, especially for women. Some coherence must be produced. Without the opportunity to name one's inner sense of self, one loses the potential for knowing self. To name sexuality and an inner sense of being is to be able to express it. As many of my narrators expressed, it is important because to be unable to express a sense of self for yourself may result in others making uncomfortable assumptions for you and about you. A most basic feminist tenet is to allow women to name and produce their own version of a comfortable, competent, active sexual self. For, as Ric states earlier, summing up my own personal sentiments, I like myself better now.

CHAPTER 6
TIME AND MATERIALS:
AGE, FEMINISMS AND MATERIAL EXPERIENCES IN SELF STORIES

Omnipresent as heteronormativity has been in recent history, it is not invariant. The discourses of gender and sexuality have changed somewhat with political generations. Stories of butch and femme have also varied over time, as I addressed briefly in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I address the variations of butch and femme stories over time and age and with the impact of material experiences. In particular, I address the paradox that my younger narrators were more likely to produce butch and femme as appearance but less likely to identify themselves as butch or femme than my older narrators. Rather than attempt to provide some final explanation for these effects, I offer several conjectures about the effects of time, feminisms and material experiences on butch and femme self stories.

Relating Institutional Persons to Reflexive Selves

An interesting paradox among my narrators emerged by age. Most of my narrators who specifically identified as butch or femme were older than 30. Most under 30 did not identify as butch or femme. Yet, many narrators under 30 dressed in ways that cause others to identify them as butch or femme. That is, they looked butch or femme in presentation, although they did not accept those identities for themselves. Indeed, I expected much more identification with butch and femme among younger narrators and

found that expectation to be exactly backward. Faith, who owns a business that is frequented by lesbians, summarizes this apparent age difference in self-production.

> Faith (early 50s, merchant, does not identify): [Responding to what butch and femme are in recent years] I think it's a fun thing really. I see it as a fun thing, especially with younger people. I like how it is that younger women feel they can have many different ways of being, identifying. They don't have to be in that role forever, either. It could be a couple of months or a couple of years…or….
>
> Sara: OK. So, you see it as something that can be quite flexible.
>
> Faith: Very much so.
>
> Sara: Especially among younger generations.
>
> Faith: Right.
>
> Sara: Do you think it's as flexible among older generations?
>
> Faith: Doesn't seem to be. But, I might just notice it more among the younger, and I base this on the people [who are my clients]. (Faith individual interview, lines 64-78)
>
> Sara: So you would say older generations of lesbians…
>
> Faith: If they are choosing to be butch or femme, it seems that that's what they are.
>
> Sara: When you say, "That's what they are," what do you mean?
>
> Faith: Um. . . if they're identifying as butch or identifying as femme, I think they're just . . . they're that way.
>
> Sara: OK. It's not flexible.
>
> Faith: It doesn't. . . it doesn't feel as flexible.
>
> Sara: Is it serious as opposed to humorous? Or…
>
> Faith: It seems more serious. (Faith individual interview, lines 109-26)

My observations concurred with Faith's. Older narrators tended to be those that specifically identified as butch or femme. The sense of "realness" about butch and femme was generally more apparent among older narrators. Nonetheless, younger narrators were

more likely to produce public selves (as fashions, if you will) that appeared to actively perform butch or femme, yet most did not identify themselves as butch or femme. So, it is quite possible to present the physical appearance of what might be identified as butch or femme without accepting them as identity. Hence, performance can be separated from a sense of inner, private self.

Sam and Jo are good exemplars of this. In Chapter 5, Sam describes their relationship as one of a "cute little butch couple," although that perception derives from appearance–"mainly from the [very short] haircuts (Sam and Jo couple interview, lines 1124-35)." They recognize that others often see them as a butch/butch couple, but they speak very clearly about not thinking of themselves as really butch, especially not as sexual interests. Although they look the part, they specifically reject it. Nonetheless, Sam provides an origin story of having "gender dysphoria" since childhood. So, younger women often reject butch or femme as private self while producing the public presentation, whereas many older women accept butch or femme as private self while being not as much concerned with dressing up the public self. What, then, is the relationship between public performance and private self?

Cahill (1998) provides a useful analytic to piece these issues together. As a means to differentiate between various social psychologies, he outlines the differences between "the individual," "the person," and "the self" with instructive results for dissecting institutional effects and private choices. He writes:

> I will use the term "individual" to refer to an organic bodily being. Following Harre (1984:26), the term "person" will refer to a "socially defined, publicly visible embodied being." Finally, I define "self" as such a being's reflexive awareness of personal agency and identity (Giddens 1991:35-55). (135)

So, in his vernacular, the individual is simply the body–a countable human being. The person embodies the accumulation of social/institutional effects. The person is similar to the "self" that Goffman (1959) describes and the "disciplined body" that Foucault (1977) describes. It is compelled by the coherences of the historical period and the ways that persons are held accountable by others. Cahill writes, "Thus, *person*al style has less to do with what an individual is *really* like than with the folk psychology to which she subscribes and is held accountable (137, emphasis in original)." Thus, the person may feel real in the sense that the coherences that are used to make sense of a person are always assumed to be real. Personhood is not actively chosen as much as socially negotiated. Hence, its origins may be confusing or unclear to the individual. The self is the active self-reflexive entity making decisions about social participation. This distinction between bodies, institutional persons and reflexive selves helps to delineate the processes of person and self production via public narratives and private choices.

I have spoken of my narrators' "selves" throughout this project because, via interviews, I asked them to actively produce those selves by asking them to discuss their lives. Indeed, I see the active acceptance or rejection of butch or femme as part of self-narration, not personhood. Accepting or rejecting the label is an active choice, albeit with limited options available and for which the person will always be held accountable. With much institutional pressure to form coherent personhood, individuals narrate a presumably unique self from the resources available in that historical moment and contextual setting. Or, as Cahill writes:

> The public person is not made in the image of a unique self; rather, an interpretive picture of a unique self is made in the image of the public person. According to Goffman, both the public person and the unique self that it implies are products of collaborative manufacture. The individual

> announces certain social identities through her appearance and other expressive media, and others place her in certain identificatory categories on the basis of such expressive evidence (Stone 1986). …The collaborative manufacture of a person results when the person whom the individual enacts coincides with the person whom others accord her (Goffman 1971:340). (137)

Here, Cahill concentrates on personhood and his notion of a negotiated person–the person I produce must coincide with the person you accord me–is very useful in understanding the accountability of individuals to others. But, in true Goffman fashion, this theory of persons implies social order–cooperation between participants, individuals and others. Later, in his article, Cahill opens the possibility for understanding the production of self in the absence of negotiated agreement. That is, what happens when the person I want to present is at odds with the person you hold me accountable to? Below, I introduce Cahill's ideas about some difficulties in negotiation, and I argue for a more active *self*-production for stigmatized identities in settings of inequality. But first, I proceed with delineating the age differences among my narrators.

Age

My narrators express awareness of some pressures to become coherent persons and at times seem at a quandary to be able to express those pressures. Nonetheless, they actively attempt to narrate self in each instance, especially in the face of public stigma. As I outline below, their choices in self-narration are limited to the coherences and politics available to each cohort. In the following sections, I describe some of the differences experienced by the two general age groupings of my narrators.

Lesbians Over 30

The women I interviewed who were more than 30 years old tended to see themselves as fitting into the local community via a few relatively organized social groups. Many of the younger women participated in these groups also but were not as established in them. The younger women also participated in some campus-oriented groups (regardless of their student status) or discussion groups for younger women. The women over 30 were much more likely to be organizers of community groups or to have lived in the community for several years. Issues of time and life course seemed very salient to the older women.

Below, Dana, Nancy and Martha discuss the waning use of butch and femme scales in the local community. They write it off as political fad or some earlier part of the life course.

> Dana (47, health professions, butch): I think that was a real simplified way that the concept of butch/femme was explained to lesbians who had never thought about butch/femme, who never had it in their perspective. And maybe it was bringing out butch/femme or a butch or a femme [for someone who] hadn't like thought of it in the whole context of the lesbian world. It was a really easy way, and fun way, to kind of explore those differences or those similarities. But I do think in [names local area where research was completed] that that has moved on.
>
> Martha (46, social worker, does not identify): Oh yeah, or at least in our age group it has moved on. And we are all at a certain age, and this was 10 years ago.
>
> Nancy (41, health professional, does not specifically identify): When we were you! [implying my age/stage in the life course] <laughs>
>
> Martha (46, social worker, does not identify): What the 18-year-olds are doing now I have no idea, but in the 40s, we can leave a lot more behind. (Club group lines 108-120)

Notice how readily the women over 30 jump into life course explanations, differentiating "their" age group from "the 18-year-olds." But, while simultaneously

arguing that the scaling of butch and femme of 10 years ago was a party fad of the times, Dana still speaks of butch and femme as real and the scaling of it as a communal facilitator for bringing presumably some already existent butch or femme person out of the individual. Was it a fad of early 1990s? Perhaps, "the scale" was just a fad. Nonetheless, many of my narrators spoke of Internet "tests" and other "quizzes" that they had taken recently–in the last few years. Additionally, butch/femme was a major topic in the local lesbian newsletter in March 2001 and April 2000, including one issue that contained one of those "humorous" quizzes. Perhaps a core group of people wants to keep the topic of butch and femme alive. Perhaps it's the fallback topic if nothing notable seems to be happening in the local community. Perhaps it is a juicy topic because it implicates sexuality and selves among lesbian communities. If it is a passing fad, it seems to be a fad that will not die.

The persistence of its use and the insistence by many that butch and femme are still "real" aspects to self is reiterated among women over 30. Below, Ric describes her identification with butchness as relatively recent, even at the age of 42.

> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): I only identified as butch recently; it took me a while to figure out what that means. I came from [names a southern city in another state] and they don't seem to have butch/femme. It's also all that historical stuff, being an older dyke that came out in the late 70s, all this feminist, "you shouldn't be butch/femme because you're just buying into male patriarchy," and "you shouldn't want to be masculine because males are assholes" and so on. It took me a while to get free of that. (Ric individual interview, line 223-28)

Butch selfhood was difficult to make privately coherent for Ric as a result of Second Wave feminist censure of butch/femme (Abbot and Love 1972: 173; Jeffreys 1989 and 1996; Stein 1997: 80). Yet for all its developmental character, butchness for her feels deeply real. As I described in Chapter 5, she experiences it as a distinctive sexual

awakening–"the ice melted (Ric individual interview, lines 282-84)." Ric later provides an origin story to retroactively make sense of her recent identification with butchness. Here, Ric's claiming of butchness is an apt exemplar of Cahill's notion of negotiating the person. It seems to come from inside, yet Ric is clear that political barriers impeded its negotiation. Ric could only negotiate her claim to butchness in a political era when others will accord an agreeable sense of butch personhood. Below, Ellie also talks about political impediments to claiming her identity as a lesbian.

> Ellie (42, merchant, femme): [Before butch and femme reemerged in the late 1980s], I couldn't imagine myself being a lesbian because the only models I knew as lesbians were these butch lesbians. I could not see myself with really short butch crew cut and blue jeans with a wallet in my back pocket. I just did not see myself doing that. That was the only thing there was, and I just could not go there.
>
> Sara: So if that was lesbian, it wasn't you?
>
> Ellie: No, because to me, it looked very militant like it was very military. I was raised in the military, and when people put on the lesbian uniform in the '70s and sort of claimed "I am a lesbian," I thought, "Why would I want to go back to a military-like behavior?"(Ellie individual interview lines 373-93)

For Ellie, the negotiation of her lesbian personhood depended on the political possibility of what comprised a "lesbian" of the moment. If "lesbian" meant short-haired, butch and militant, she could not claim herself a lesbian. There was not enough space in the public coherence of 1970s "lesbian" for her to claim it as her own person. She could not even imagine herself a "femme" at the time. Yet, now Ellie is very pronounced about her femme personhood. She cited for me many lesbian authors, whom she has sought out, in person (for example, Merrill Mushroom and Minnie Bruce Pratt) to make claims to her legitimate femme self. The narrative resource of "femme lesbian" is now available to her in this political moment. She can, less problematically, negotiate herself as a femme

person. Similar to Ric, she identifies her femmeness as "real" or a core sense of self. So, Ellie is only partly aware of the institutional impacts on her person formation. My younger narrators demonstrated a similar formation of personhood but with different political possibilities of their times.

Lesbians Under 30

The women that I interviewed who were under 30 years old had lesbian social circles, but they tended to be more oriented around campus or local bars. Many participated in "community" organizations, but they were less likely to hold an organizational position in them. Many of the younger women were also from the local or regional area and had lived in the area for a number of years, regardless of any relationship to the university. Most were university students or had been for some period of time. The following passage from a focus group interview of younger lesbians exemplifies their general rejection of butch and femme as self-identities.

> Sara: Does anybody in some way identify as butch or femme or not really?
>
> Cindy (25, student, does not identify): I don't.
>
> Mindy (19, student, does not identify): I think that [not identifying with butch and femme] is something that's kind of happening with our generation. I mean maybe not, but this is just something that I've been noticing–that people in our age group won't identify or won't choose something to be called. I may be wrong. There are probably a lot of people that still do, but a lot of the people that I've met and that I've had experiences with have not wanted to label themselves.
>
> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify): Yeah. (Youth group interview lines 371-81)

This was a general sentiment expressed over and over among most younger narrators, although some were less outspoken about this sentiment. All of my younger narrators were familiar with the language of butch and femme, yet to publicly declare

butch or femme personhood was not as acceptable as among the older narrators. Most younger narrators were likely to reject any specific marker of personhood in favor of "fluidity." Vanessa describes the fluidity of her own attraction and then gives a key to her generational cohort.

> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify): I used to be very attracted to feminine women. And that just kind of changes, you know, like, "Oh, well, I'm attracted to more butchy women." I just think it's just very fluid. But it would be harder if I were to find that I wanted another femme woman because, like I said, it's easier to pick someone out that's a butch lesbian. You know, to say, "Oh, they're lesbian." You know, it's just harder [to recognize femme women as lesbian]. So. You have to look for the key chain or the bumper stickers or something. (Vanessa individual interview lines 203-10)

Part of the paradox is apparent here. While Vanessa rejects butch or femme, she still uses butch or femme appearance to recognize other lesbians. They are still valid as attributes to recognize others even though she rejects the "realness" of butch or femme.

Vanessa also clues us in to the political times in which she has been forming her public and private person and self. She *can* use bumper stickers and key chains as identifiers to announce lesbianism. Vanessa has grown up in an era that recognizes some publicly acceptable personhood for lesbians. Rather than only displaying clothing styles, more fluidity of presentation is possible because rainbows and triangles on kitchy, personal effects are now common for announcing one's membership on the community. Indeed, as another sign of the era, the youth focus group began by telling coming out stories for the first half an hour of the interview. Sitting in a circle as if attending a group discussion meeting, they launched into each person's tale of coming out after I had only keyed them to introduce themselves. This suggests two things. First, the discourse of coming out was very salient for them at their present age. Many had only been "out" for a few years (and some only a few months), and the coming out experience had comprised a

large period of time in their young lives as lesbian persons. Second, they knew the drill. They plunged into the discourse of "how I came out" because they had done so in the past in similar groups. They had groups to go to! Each person was readily prepared to discuss their experience in groups, because youth discussion groups have become increasingly more available, even common, in the recent deacde. Although many right-wing groups still contest the existence of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender youth groups, it is not uncommon to find such groups on college campuses or even in high schools. Unlike Ellie's experience above, lesbians under 30 are more likely to be able to find some public forum where "lesbian" is an available personhood to occupy.

Wendy refers to the availability of resources for queer youth below. She describes an experience she had at a transgender conference that we both attended.

> Wendy (23, white, corporate professional, thinks she looks "gay boy"): I think it's just our generation. It's a whole generational thing. I think that it's just becoming more and more accepted. You still have kids that are butch, and even transgender is starting to be accepted–like the conference, all the kids that were trans. I was one of the older people at the conference, like with you guys [myself and my partner], like Andi and Sam, we were some of the oldest ones there. I remember being on the elevator [with someone who] was in the [names a nearby city] youth group. She was 15! I remember because she couldn't drive, and I remember thinking, "Wow!" I was 23 at the time, and I can't imagine being at a conference at age 15. (Wendy individual interview lines 356-63)

The availability of a transgender movement is exemplary of the kinds of differences that are now, not only available, but supported by younger lesbians and queer youth. One of my narrators in particular exemplifies this interest in ambiguity. Louise speaks of herself as "lesbian" and as a "femme dyke" who not only emphasizes a sense of femininity but also allows her natural mustache to grow–that is, she does not bleach it or wax it as heteronormative ideals would suggest for women with darker lip hair. Although

slightly over 30, she falls between generations and promotes ideals of both. She describes her interests as follows:

> Louise (32, student, femme dyke): I do things that maybe aren't typically things that girls in this society are meant to do. Prior to going back to school and working for the university, I painted houses and maybe that job wasn't necessarily a feminine job. . . . I ride a motorcycle and maybe *that* might not necessarily be a feminine thing. I have a mustache, so that can confuse people sometimes. . . . And [I] can even be mistaken for a boy or a man, depending upon who's looking at me. So, I guess just inside, I identify as a femme, but I don't have a problem with projecting any ambiguity to the outside world, because I think that ambiguity is important. (Louise individual interview lines 135-160)

Louise's concerns are based both in Second Wave feminist issues of inequality and in Third Wave feminist issues of self-presentation. Her interview in particular suggested a very self-reflexive awareness of time. In addition to having differential political periods in which to come out as lesbian, the stories many of my narrators told about time are compelling. The coherence of butch and femme depends on knowledge of its roots in the mid-century era and ways in which they have been narrated as potential personhood more recently. Below, I discuss the differential interpretations of Second and Third Wave feminism and the different interpretations of time for my narrators.

Stories About Time

Understanding narratives of time and its relationship to lesbian culture is important in dissecting interpretations of butch and femme selves and the potential for personhood. By "stories of time," I mean not just the impact of historical events but also the mythologizing of events that can often incite nostalgic or critical interpretations. For example, Stonewall, a bar fight between drag queens and the police in New York City in 1969, has been mythologized as "the" beginning of LGBT movements in the U.S. (and

perhaps worldwide?). More than just a historic event, it has become ritualized into annual Pride celebrations and dramatized in text and film. This is not to suggest that the event was not historically significant, but that its significance derives largely from its retelling and celebration. So, it is not just the "real" historical event that affects interpretations of time, but also romanticized stories that tell and retell the meaning of events.

The retelling of history is important community work. It maintains a sense of collective identity. St. Jean and Feagin (1998) refer to the retelling of history through "family interaction" among American black communities as "collective memory." They write:

> "Collective memory" here refers to how people experience their present in light of the past. It's what is left of the past in the lived experiences of groups, or what groups make of the past. Collective and individual identities are shaped by collective memory. Parents, grandparents and other relatives, as well as libraries, cemeteries, photographs, and postcards, are mediators and carriers of the past to the present. They are sites of collective memory and promoters of collective identity. (30)

For stigmatized groups such as African Americans and lesbians, the recording of a community history unbiased by dominant interests has not been available through public resources–public libraries mainstream media sources, etc.[19] Hence, the practice of retelling stories of history to maintain a sense of collective memory is of heightened importance for creating community and individual identity. In the case of lesbians, the recording of lesbian history has only been made available in lesbian media sources since the 1970s (Abbott and Love 1972; Martin and Lyon 1972) and in more mainstream sources since the 1980s and 1990s (Faderman 1981, 1991 and 1992; Feinberg 1993;

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[19] In making this statement, I am not implying that the experiences of African Americans and lesbians are similar or even specifically related, except of course for African American lesbians. I am only suggesting that stigmatized communities suffer the inability to record their voices in public spaces.

Hollibaugh and Moraga 1981; Nestle 1981 and 1992; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). The collective memory of older forms of butch and femme is shaped by its telling and the form and timing of its recording.

The most commonly romanticized butch/femme story is that of 1950s butch/femme bar communities. Referring to "back in the day" or "the old stories," many narrators called up some kind of mythic notion of "1950s butch/femme." The consistency of this story was impressive. The majority of my narrators spoke of it fluently and assumed that other lesbians knew what "1950s butch/femme" means: stereotypic, masculine, sexually aggressive butches dressed in men's clothes going to bars to find stereotypic, feminine, sexually passive femmes in poodle skirts. A phenomenon similar to what I described above reportedly did exist during some period of the mid-century (1940s to 1960s) in at least some communities, and scholarly work exists to document it and its historical significance (Faderman 1991; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993), although most documentation has occurred several decades later, especially in the 1990s. But rather than citing the historical literature, most of my narrators cited more popular texts – novels or anthologies of lesbian experiences. I do not mean to suggest that popular texts are somehow less "accurate" than scholarly texts. But the often-dramatized works of lesbian media do seem to have been more influential among lesbians than the less dramatized, scholarly texts. Below, Eli explains how lesbian popular media was influential in forming her lesbian personhood.

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): When I was coming out, I did a lot of reading, and I think that's when I started figuring out what butch and femme labels [are] and stuff. (Eli individual interview lines 558-9)

Eli names *The Persistent Desire* (Nestle 1992), a collection of self stories written primarily by non-academic lesbians, as the most influential text she read. The book is

specifically designed to document a dying generation of butch and femme lesbians, especially of the pre-Second Wave era. In Eli's case, the book was not just history but current day instruction.

In addition to "1950s" stories, narrators also reference some more recent stories– primarily from the 1990s. In the following section, I discuss the significance of these two time periods and how they affect self-narration.

1950s

Often referencing heterogendered paradigms or historical concepts of "the original" 1950s butch and femme that is the topic of several popular lesbian novels and history texts, narrators give a sense that they are answering to a coherence system that has been in place for a long time and one which continues to plague them in the everyday practice of their lives. Very few of my narrators came out prior to the advent of late 1960s-early 1970s Second Wave Feminism. Today, a lesbian would have to be at least in her 70s to have been active in lesbian bars of the supposedly original 1950s. Unfortunately, I did not access any women such as this. So my narrators rely primarily on stories of this time. An amazingly persuasive and widely read story of this time is Leslie Feinberg's (1993) *Stone Butch Blues*. The next two quotes cite it specifically.

> Martha (46, social worker, does not identify): [Referring to butch and femme today] Well, if you read in the old literature and the old stories, butch and femme was clearly defined. Butches did this; femmes did this– back in the '50s. I love reading that old stuff. But they had very clearly defined roles: butches dressed in men's clothing and they combed their hair a certain way and …some of these people were probably transgendered and didn't know it because they weren't even able to relate to that. (Club group lines 206-11)

"The old stories" that Martha referenced is Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, the title and author of which she invokes help from Dana and Nancy to produce. *Stone Butch*

Blues for Martha is the exemplar of lesbian history of the 1950s and read as fact. Wendy invokes the novel similarly.

> Wendy (23, corporate professional, looks "gay boy"): I remember reading *Stone Butch Blues*, and that was the first lesbian book I ever read. I must have read it when I first came out, five or six years ago, and to me, Leslie Feinberg was butch, you know. I mean she's transgendered, but you know that's a whole new, different concept. But to me, Leslie Feinberg in the story–well I guess it was intended to be her character–her girlfriend was feminine and she was butch. But I don't know if that's because of how society used to be back then.
>
> Cindy (25, student, does not identify): I think it was back then.
>
> Wendy: Yeah. And I think that things have changed slowly over the years–like I have a hard time defining myself, but I joke around about it with my friends. Andi and I are constantly like, "Yeah. You are butch today, you know." <laughs> And, we joke around about it. But when it comes down to it, I don't care.
>
> Andi (21, student, does not identify): That's really what it looks like to me. I can identify more masculine traits in people–like what would be more butch, like to determine what would be more butch behavior or effeminate reaction or something like that–but the category doesn't make sense to me as with masculinity and femininity. (Youth group lines 848-60)

At the beginning of this passage, Wendy demonstrates that she understands Leslie Feinberg and her character, Jess, to be one and the same. *Stone Butch Blues* is a 1990s story (written in 1993) of 1950s/60s butch/femme meets 1970s feminist censure. Admittedly dramatized and not written as an autobiography, it is read by many as purely autobiographical and factually true. Indeed, based on that premise, I have used *Stone Butch Blues* as "data" for a theoretical discussion of lesbian interpretations of stone butch and transgender identifications (Crawley forthcoming 2002). *Stone Butch Blues* is both nostalgic and instructional and its impact has been felt widely. It has established Feinberg herself as an icon of lesbian history. In Wendy's individual interview, she told me that, having met Leslie Feinberg, she understands her to be the icon of butchness.

Interestingly, as an icon of butchness, Leslie Feinberg is understood as an extreme. Many narrators recognize that she is not just somewhat butch but "transgendered"–the 1990s concept of an extreme performance of masculinity that passes beyond butchness, such (female-to-male) transgendered people often can pass as male (Halberstam 1998; Prosser 1995).

Importantly, younger narrators and older narrators alike use this character as a benchmark to demonstrate what "we" are not doing now. The purpose of this historical character is to be a sounding board for what we are not. It is both exemplar of the extreme butchness of an earlier time and a symbol of what we work not to be today.

Some of my younger narrators spoke similarly about older straight women who came of age in the 1950s era. These women also symbolize the femininity that we now seek to work against. Below, Louise speaks at length about older women as an example of why she is interested in gender ambiguity.

> Louise (32, student, femme dyke): Well, I'm very interested in women who are my mother's age. Late fifties, early sixties right now. Because that woman grew up during the 50s, and that woman was told, it's not okay to drink. It's not okay to smoke. It's not okay to play pool. You know, you have to wear gloves. You have to wear a hat that matches your shoes. . . You need to wear skirts. That woman grew up with a lot of rules and restrictions. That woman was expected to get married by the time she was 19 or 20 or she was an old maid. If she was going to be successful in her life, that meant she would have kids. That meant she'd get married first before she had kids. Then she would have children. She'd stay home. She'd raise her children. And, for her that was a fulfilling life. That was what you were told in the 1950s. And I think, I look at the women of my mother's generation and my mother, and they weren't encouraged to play sports. Many of them weren't encouraged to go to college. If they did go to college, they studied teaching or nursing or something like that. They were brought up to be good girls. To not make trouble and to not make waves. And I think that when the '60s happened, a lot of women who were my mother's age maybe embraced that and were happy for the younger women. But some of them, it really freaked them out, because they started to think, "Well if I could do or be anything I want, then that means I'm not

> who I want to be." And that's a really scary thing. So. I guess that type of woman–my mother, my mother's woman–has been very influential in my life, in me not wanting to be my mother's woman and me wanting to be an example to girls who are younger than me. And you know that, it's okay to play sports. It's okay to ride motorcycles. It's okay to live by yourself. It's okay to not get married. It's okay to not want to have babies. It's okay to not want to have boyfriends. So I guess that it is important for me [pause] to not be a stereotype. (Louise individual interview lines 657-750)

Louise falls in the in-between generation. She values feminism and works toward Third Wave feminist ideals. Mindy and Vanessa speak similarly about not being like their parents' generation.

> Mindy (19, student, does not identify): [After discussing why butch and femme are confining and having to "fit into a role"] I know we are talking about the lesbian community, but a lot of the straight women that are old–like our parents' age–will do things for their family, for their husbands, that they wouldn't do in a society where it would be acceptable for them not to do it. You know. I can't think of a very good example right now but. . .
>
> Vanessa (19, student, does not identify, Mindy's partner): I can think of an example. My mom wore her hair long for 15 years, and she would perm it, and she would do all this stuff to her hair because my dad loves long hair. She's got it very short right now, but she just whacked it off two years ago and said, "Well, this is my hair." But she wore it down to her waist for 15 years because that's what my dad wanted.
>
> Andi (21, student, does not identify): Did she want to cut it short?
>
> Vanessa: Oh, yeah. She wanted short hair, but every time they would go out, my dad would go, "Oh, look at that pretty hair." My mom would do what he wanted. I remember just always thinking, "I hope I never do that." You know, if I want to cut my hair, I'll cut my hair. (Youth group lines 1260-75)

There are at least two points of significance here. First, the significance of the 1950s lies not just in the historical period itself, but in the ways we narrate it in the present as a measuring stick for our current personhood and politics. Second, the 1950s era is regularly used as a means to establish what we are no longer. Even among my undergraduate students in gender and Women's Studies courses, the paradigm of 1950s

gender is often used to demonstrate "how far we've come" from an oppressive era of gender differentiation. But, while we like to think we in no way replicate the practices of gender differentiation, as I showed in Chapter 4, discursive practices of today still produce gender difference. That is, perceived masculinity implies competence while perceived femininity implies primarily presentations of beauty. The extremes of these public, performative selves may be toned down, but the language of gender assessment is one in which we are fluent.

1990s

Curiously, narrators also talk about transgender as yet another category of personhood, which interestingly, is not as problematic as iconic butchness. Introduced by Leslie Feinberg among others, transgender identification is a 1990s concept that is both more extreme than 1950s butchness and somehow more acceptable. Transgender identification is understood as both extreme and ambiguous, a contradiction that characterizes 1990s identities. Along with the writing of much of the literature on 1950s butch and femme (Feinberg 1993; Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestle 1991), the 1990s saw the publication of "newer" versions of butch and femme (Faderman 1992). They are the performance of extreme public personas coupled with an argument for gender ambiguity or gender disruption–for example, drag kinging, stage drag performances of female bodied people performing male personas (Halberstam 1998), or the recuperation of "bad girl" (read extremely sexual) femininity for femmes (Harris and Crocker 1997, Newman 1995, Rednour 2000). As a result, 1990s butch and femme is argued to be performative but with little expectation of "real" substance.

Nationally available, lesbian media sources have played up this kind of glossy, iconic ideal for both butch and femme, which includes a variety of permutations of sexual

notions such as "top" and "bottom." Some examples of this media include various magazines, books such as *The Femme Mystique* (Newman 1995), *The Femme's Guide to the Universe* (Rednour 2000), and *Boys Like Her* (Taste This 1998) and films like *My Femme Divine* (Everett 1999), which tells the story of a butch bottom who laments the loss of her relationship with a femme top. These iconic notions are based on what I perceive to be urban, performative standards with which non-urban women are, at times, reluctant to align themselves. Thus, the discursive, national-level "community" is understood as separate from everyday experiences of self in non-urban places.

According to one narrator, the lesbian media is glossy and trying to expand but having a hard time.

> Louise (32, student, femme dyke):I think out of the most of them–the glossies, like "Girlfriends" and "On Our Backs"–"On Our Backs" is asking really hard: "Please send us who you are. Please offer us more representations of who we are. Please send us women who don't necessarily fit into the perfect skin, height, weight requirements. Please send us the women who aren't girlishly attractive." This is the editors who are asking that, you know, like in photo essays: "Please send us more." And of course the readers are going to write in and say, "You don't have enough dykey women. You don't have enough [women over] 200 pounds.". . . And, I think the media, the queer media and the lesbian media still do not feel that comfortable. We are still worried and have a certain amount of fear about what the straight people are going to think of us. Particularly the Christian right because they have so much power. And um, our existence is still so very fragile, you know. (Louise individual interview 1612-41)

As Louise explains, glossy magazines of the national-level lesbian media are only in some ways attempting to include a representation of everyday women. Many of these magazines have a reputation for publishing shiny, pretty, even radical images of lesbians against which many not-so-hip, non-urban lesbians would measure unfavorably. But the images are very performative of a style that mocks "realness" (Case 1989; Faderman 1992). They replicate a trend of 1990s butch and femme that mocks itself and attempts to

move in a variety of previously incoherent directions. Eli explains her read of the newer generation of lesbians.

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): Like with the younger generation, I think that they may be taking less labels…But uh, I kind of think that, you know, with the sort of transgender movement, people are trying to say, "Hey, we're all just people." There are so many labels now, it's kind of hard to get them straight…It's kind of weird, cause I think they're going full circle in a way, like in the '70s, you know, people wanted to drop labels and stuff and get rid of butch/femme and "we're all androgynous"…You know that kind of thing happened. And then, uh, I think somehow in the 80s or something, it sort of crept back in. Now it's kind of going back to, "Okay, we don't want labels anymore, we're all just people." (Eli individual interview, lines 967-1021)

Reading the transgender movement into this new wave of political projects, Eli identifies the crux of the politics of radical performance. The issue is to present a radical public persona that creates confusion in the coherence of traditional masculine and feminine personhood (Butler 1993; Halberstam 1998). As Eli says, the myriad possibilities suggest, "We're all just people." In a sense, this presentation of radical variety via formerly coherent gender might be understood as the new androgyny. It is performing something that means nothing–performing a semi-coherent person that the individual continues to argue is not really existent. It is a refusal for the public and private persons to agree. In this way, the coherence of gender is exposed as false via its own use. The question is whether the gender confusion is working to reduce accountability for personhood. Are we all just people? I address material experiences in the next section.

"We're All Just People"?–Material Experiences in Self-Production

The academic debates between the importance of texts and symbolic reality and the reality of material experiences have been waged for some years. Performance theorists (Butler 1990 and 1993, Case 1989) and queer theorists (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990) have been criticized by social inequalities theorists, especially theorists of Black Feminist Thought (Hill Collins 1991 and 1998) and Marxist Feminists[20] that the material experiences of discrimination get lost in theories of texts. The link between text and physical experience is still under debate. I believe that Cahill's understanding of the production of interpretive, everyday persons helps to clarify this relationship.

Using ethnomethodological notions of accountability to others and the negotiation of personhood, Cahill (1998) provides a link between interpretive selves and material experiences. Recall that Cahill envisions personhood, as does Goffman, as a negotiation between the individual and an other. But he provides for the possibility that others do not necessarily see us as we would intend them to. Cahill writes:

> This argument does not necessarily imply that the part of a person conveyed by others through their treatment of an individual is no more significant than the part expressed through the individual's demeanor. And there are good theoretical and empirical reasons to suspect that others' treatment of an individual can be far more significant that the individual's own demeanor. There are also good reasons to suspect that such asymmetries often reflect the differential social statuses that participants bring to the person production process. (138)

Critiquing Goffman for assuming egalitarian social statues, Cahill provides for the possibility that the person one is understood to be by an other may be so filled with stigma that any attempt by an individual to produce a legitimate personhood will be rejected. That is, accountability by others may significantly outweigh the ability of

[20] For a nice anthology of the debates on some of these issues, see Nicholson (1990).

individuals to artfully create a variety of selves. I interpret this as a means to theorize the production of personhood and self in the face of stigma and non-consentual interaction.

My narrators expressed a variety of ways in which they were held accountable to social statuses beyond their own control. Instances of overt and subtle sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism were widely available by all my narrators regardless of age. Below, I discuss the effect of overt stigma on self-production.

Sexism and Sexual Safety

In its most basic terms, sexism is being held accountable by others for having a female body. In the face of all evidence suggesting absolute competence at certain tasks, women are often disallowed access to certain male-only spaces simply because female-bodied people are presumed incompetent (Crawley 1998 and 2002; Weston 1990). If women are allowed to those spaces, they are always accountable to femaleness, regardless of the seamlessness of their performance of masculinity. Many of my narrators described the accountability to femaleness that they were required to negotiate. Some of my most butch-appearing narrators describe outrageous displays of sexism on an everyday basis. Below are two particularly onerous work-related accounts by Ric and Eli in separate interviews.

> Ric (42, Ph.D. student, butch): The guys in the lab have a really hard time with me. And just by me being there, it's a presence thing, you know. I can only imagine what it would be like if I were really a bigger person and took up more space–you know–more threatening. My impression is they don't think women should take up space or have the same rights. And I don't think they think that consciously; it's just ingrained, and so when somebody walks in that's more masculine than they are, it consciously or subconsciously upsets them. …It's totally unfair. The two women that I know right off hand in [the lab] are so much sharper than the guys, so much smarter. And then, yeah, sexism is rampant. (lines 368-421)

And:

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): Well actually, I went to school for motorcycle repair, but I can't get a job to save my life, mostly because they're sexist pigs. Sometimes, I wonder when I try to get a job, is it because I'm a dyke or is it because I'm a woman? And, probably most of the time it's both. I mean I went to school in [names a town in Florida] and, they're supposed to help you try to get a job. They called every shop in town and no place would even talk with me. I mean, there was this one guy, he said [using a deeper voice], "Is it a woman? No way, no woman is working in my shop, ever." So they're all sexist pigs, you know. And as a matter of fact, over at [names a shop], I've been over there so many times and tried to get a job, and they're like, "Oh, you know, if you only had more experience." I'm like, "Okay. I can't get my foot in the door." …Finally, like probably a month or two months ago, I saw [an ad] in the papers, "Set-up technician [there]." I'm like, "That's my job!" I have my resume, I have my recommendations from school, everything. I go in there all happy, excited. I'm gonna get this job, you know. [After calling several times] The guy says, "Oh, we hired somebody for that job." I said, "Why didn't I get hired?" "Oh, well that guy had school." I'm like, "Well, I had school." "Well, you know, well, he had school, you know." Uh, I'm like, "Cause he has a penis!" That's the way they do it. So, basically the motorcycle industry is completely sexist. (Eli individual interview, lines 213-351)

Both these narrators are consciously aware of the accountability they suffer for their female bodies. In all male spaces, there is no ability to prove one's skills. As Eli states, you "can't get your foot in the door." No amount of self-presentation affects person negotiation. The answer is final and resounding before the interaction begins. The extent of this kind of sexism has yet to be recognized in much of the present day literature on performance. What does one do when the performance is preempted? Indeed, in these instances, the notion of patriarchy seems difficult to move beyond.

A related issue of accountability for a female body comes in terms of sexual safety, an issue I found most surprising in my interviews. The issue of rape was discussed by butches, femmes, and non-identified lesbians. It seems pervasive in the everyday existence of female-bodied personhood and self-production. Louise, below, notes its impact.

> Sara: Do you think that femmeness has anything to do with a particular kind of sexuality or not sexually? It sounds to me like you aren't very role-bound in terms of thinking about sexuality.
>
> Louise (32, student, femme dyke): I think that one thing that makes me less restrictive, that I'm very thankful of, is that I've never been sexually abused or raped. Unfortunately that's uncommon, and um, so when I'm in bed, I don't have to go there in my head. (Louise individual interview, lines 1376-83)

The experience of rape and potentially even the threat of rape affects the development of the private self. It is an awareness that one cannot afford to dismiss. Another narrator explains the effect of the threat of rape on her public self-presentation.

> Cathy (42, social worker, butch–7): Basically if I didn't fear being raped, I may not hold back [and dress more masculine]. But I am not interested in being in people's face. There are some times when Wanda and I walk hand in hand, and there are some times when I just let her hand go. It's the same thing in how I dress that I don't want to be raped.
>
> Sara: Because you'll feel retribution for not behaving appropriately for someone…
>
> Cathy: Exactly. The redneck would just "give me what I deserve" and you know there are rednecks in this town. Sometimes that's why I hold back. I think instinctually I would be a better dresser if I dressed [in] male [clothing]. Because I know what looks good [but] I'm not willing to wear [it] because I don't like it because I wouldn't feel good. You know, I would probably be a much better dresser. You know I would wear ties several days a week. I love ties.
>
> Sara: Right. So you feel that you could dress more fashionably if you hadn't lacked that, more comfortable, more physically safe [feeling].
>
> Cathy: Right. If I felt physically safer, then I would wear more men's clothes. Wearing men's clothes does not make me feel safe. (Cathy and Wanda couple interview pages 17-19)

So Cathy has consciously changed her public self for fear of rape. This threat, she explains, is real in her everyday experience, and it is not negotiable. No amount of her own negotiation will change how others perceive her if they choose to attack her sexually

for having a female body. In these instances, the individual ability to negotiate an agentic self may be very limited by the actions or expected actions of others.

Racism

If sexism is accountability to a female body, racism is accountability for having a darker body. Race is the only other social status that as visibly apparent on the body as (presumed) sex. It also comes with no ability to negotiate. What others see in you may be the only reality that counts in social interaction. Hence, the negotiation of personhood and self are significantly affected. Of all the narrators I interviewed, only two were black. One was Asian American but had lived a relatively uncommon and race-privileged experience such that she herself felt not particularly able to comment on race. The appearance of difference was salient to her but not so much the experience of racism. Both narrators that are black commented about the affects of race in some detail.

Cindy suggests below that the visible marker of blackness required that she negotiate race before sexual orientation, significantly altering how she might choose to develop self-presentation if race did not require so much accountability. Candy and Cindy discuss their experiences below.

> Candy (22, black, student, does not identify): [Following a discussion of Cindy's frustration at being labeled "butch-looking"] I think that I completely feel how Cindy is feeling. I feel like not everybody needs to know that I'm gay because for me it's really hard enough dealing as a black woman.
>
> Cindy (25, black, student, does not identify): Yeah. So you shy away from accentuating anything other than skin color.
>
> Candy: I want to deal with things one at a time, "I'm black and I'm gay"– one at a time. Specifically for me, my first true out experience has been in the South, and it was really hard to be black in the South.
>
> Cindy: [Yeah] In the South.

> Candy: It's like I have gone through some mental . . . like it's some hard shit dealing with the racism and homophobia in the South, and sometimes I just don't want people to know I'm gay. I'm black, deal with me as black, but I'll let you know later that I'm gay when I'm comfortable and I feel like you're not judging me any more because I'm black. Then I'll let you know I'm gay and see how you take that and after that, let's see if we hang out. (Youth group lines 512-46)

Here, Candy talks about being black as the first marker of identity because she can hide her lesbianism. She frequently does not present herself as overtly lesbian so others can "deal with me as black" first. For Cindy and Candy, race is the issue that is non-negotiable. Regardless of other statuses, they will be understood as black and treated accordingly no matter how they perceive themselves.

Although I did not interview a sufficient number of black women to account for the prevalence of butch and femme in black lesbian communities, Cindy and Candy did comment on their perceptions.

> Cindy (25, black, student, does not identify): Black women are into roles a lot more.
>
> Wendy (23, white, corporate professional, thinks she looks "gay boy"): They are?
>
> Cindy: Uh-huh. Yeah, pretty much it's butch/femme. Like a lot of clubs that I go to are butch/femme. I look like I could be [either], but for that reason I'm not very successful at black clubs either. I'm trying not to like overgeneralize but, in this town and this state, there is a line that most lesbians fall around. Every time, I mean, you know.
>
> Andi (21, white, student, does not identify): Do you think that's why you haven't been very popular with black girls?
>
> Cindy: Yeah, because butches don't know you know if I'm a butch and femmes don't know if I'm a femme or something. (Youth group lines 386-99)

Later, Candy comments:

> Candy (25, black, student, does not identify): I just feel like black culture is definitely defined by butch and femme, and when you don't necessarily fit into one of those cages, then. . .
>
> Cindy (22, black, student, does not identify): You're just kind looked down on.
>
> Candy: Yeah. (Youth group lines 436-41)

After explaining how she often feels uncomfortable for feeling like she must choose butch or femme in black lesbian clubs, Candy says, "I feel like I'm always being judged. That's how I feel." (Youth group line 436) The combination of race and sexual orientation and femaleness provides limited options for artfully creating personhood. So, as Candy suggests earlier, she acts selectively in self-production. She will be the person she chooses to display in various settings. This may be understood as being "closeted," but she sees it much more in terms of controlling her self-presentation–in creating more options for herself.

An interesting aspect of the race relations that I found among my narrators in focus group sessions, particularly, was the lack of knowledge of both white and black lesbians of each other. Although all of the participants of this focus group were completely comfortable discussing the issues together and were completely polite and willing to hear each other's ideas, white women had little knowledge of black lesbians' communities and, to a lesser degree, vice versa. Below, Jo overtly voices her lack of knowledge about black lesbian communities and experiences.

> Jo (19, student, often assumed to be butch): I have a question. Is there a large black, gay community [in the local area]? I lived here for 16 years but, [I still don't know.](Youth group lines 459-60)

Although Jo has lived in the community almost her entire life and, in fact, grew up in the local white lesbian community since her mother is also lesbian, she is not even

aware of the existence of a black lesbian community. Conversely, in the following exchange, Cindy is not clear about Jo's experience.

> Cindy: So are you assumed to be gay a lot?
>
> Jo: Yes. <laughs> Oh, all the time. <Many others laugh as though that is a silly question.>

Interestingly, this exchange took place over a discussion about a person that they both had known separately for some time. Although they had common acquaintances (Jo had met this woman, a black lesbian, through public school), neither was outwardly aware of the experiences of the other. The effects of racism–accountability for skin color–continue to be staggering.

Paradoxically, all my narrators expressed a sincere interest in creating ideal communities that would be inclusive. Although almost total segregation among lesbian communities exists and little effort of overcome that difference appeared to be taking place, all my white narrators lamented the lack of diversity in their everyday communities. I don't feel that these were simply pleasantries expressed in politically correct times. I believe the concerns of my white narrators were earnest. But I believe the extent of accountability for skin color remains a sadly unaddressed issue such that the depth of racism in the U.S. in everyday interaction is still overlooked by a majority of white people.

Classism

If racism and sexism are accountability to physical markers, classism is accountability to money and status. Much has been predicted about the effects of class on butch and femme (Gilmartin 1996, Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993). But, as in a previous study of mine (Crawley 2000), the effects of class on my narrators was mixed.

Eli and Ric report suffering sexism at work both felt they lost access to greater success for their butch interests. Surely this makes self-presentation a class issue for non-normative female-bodied people. However, another butch-appearing narrator is independently wealthy. Perhaps, upper-class status allows one the ability to arrange self as one chooses. Yet, none of these butch narrators choose to present herself as less butch as a result of class issues.

Many older narrators talked about altering their appearance for work, or they spoke of lesbians they knew who did. For example, one narrator spoke of a butch friend who was a lawyer and was compelled to wear a skirt to succeed in law. Nonetheless, they confirmed, she's still a butch–in a dress. Some of my younger narrators spoke of feeling free to express themselves before they entered certain work places. So the workplace itself may compel one to negotiate some change in self-presentation. But a clear pattern did not emerge among my narrators.

While none of my narrators was truly disadvantaged by class status, many were also not terribly advantaged. Perhaps, a university town provides opportunities even for those not academically trained. Employment did not seem to be an issue in the area where I did my research, although the location was sufficiently rural that very few of my narrators were paid well. Perhaps my interview site is sufficiently a mix of middle America that class issues were not as apparent.

Perhaps a study of social class would be better served by ethnographic work in a more class-specific setting. Additionally, ethnography may prove better suited to address class since most Americans, except possibly the very rich and the truly disadvantaged,

thinks they are "middle class." As a result, my study did not provide clear evidence of class effects.

Homophobia

Unlike classism, accounts of homophobia were plentiful. If sexism and racism are accountability to physical markers, homphobia is accountability to not participating in heteronormative structure. The accounts of homophobia among my narrators ranged from uncomfortable interactions to attempted physical assaults. My younger narrators were particularly vocal about their uncomfortable interactions, which happened in many local community settings. Sam and Jo relate a case of overt homophobia below.

> Sam (23, student, perceived as butch/butch couple by others): [Describing an instance while eating at a restaurant: The owner] comes over to our table, stands in front of it and *stares*.
>
> Jo (19, student, Sam's partner): Yeah.
>
> Sam: We already had our food, and he was just standing there going like this. [Makes a face like staring.]
>
> Jo: Yeah, he was just staring, not saying anything. He just walked over and was like…[imitates staring]
>
> Sam: He was just staring–for like a full 30 seconds, he didn't say anything, nothing. And another thing, too, he just looked right through us. He wasn't even looking at us. He was looking right through us, and he went over and sat down. We were really pissed, and we were trying figure out what to do about it.
>
> Jo: I wanted to go over and fight. Uh-huh.
>
> Sam: But then, I went over.
>
> Jo: I couldn't do it.
>
> Sam: Yeah she was really upset about it. So I went over to him and said, "I was wondering if I could talk to you about what happened over there." And he was just like, "Well, I can't figure out if you are boys or girls." And I [said], "Well, I think it's really rude of you to dehumanize us and do that without even saying hello. I mean that is really dehumanizing, and I don't appreciate it." And he goes, "I can't tell if you are boys or girls. That

> one over there, [referring to Jo] I just can't figure it out." [Then he said], "Well, I don't look like a girl, do I?" And I said, "Well, you reserve the right to." < whole group laughs> And he goes, "No, I reserve the right to look." And I'm like, "No you don't." "I reserve the right to." "No, you don't." "I reserve the right to." "NO, YOU DON'T." And I walked away. <laughs> So I actually got up in his face about it. I think it was probably our worst experience so far with gender and just gender checking the box. (Youth interview lines 612-646)

Although Sam discusses this as a case of mis-recognizing gender, it is clear that the restaurant owner is troubled by his inability to recognize the sex of Sam and Jo and the difficulty of them appearing together as a couple. Interestingly, Sam does attempt to negotiate control of her personhood by defining the restaurant owner's behavior as poor manners. In the face of stigma, she attempts to negotiate a legitimate person for herself and for Jo. It remains unclear as to how effective that negotiation was for the restaurant owner. Nonetheless, she took more control of her production of self than he would have preferred. Sam and Jo reported many other instances of being called "dykes," "fags," "lesbians," "faggots," as well as having a penny thrown at them from cars. Apparently their appearance is troubling on an everyday basis.

Mindy relates a similar instance of lesbian baiting.

> Mindy (19, student, does not identify): That happened to me, but it wasn't that blatant. They were talking to each other, not calling out. They were frat boys, you know. They were like, "Pykes!" and I had misheard them. I looked at them, and then they started yelling, "Dyke!" and I'm like, "Excuse me!?!" And [one of them answered], "I said 'Pyke.' I'm talking to my brother down there." (youth group lines 694-704)

This instance took place on campus among presumably well-off students. Homophobia seemed to be rampant in many settings. Cindy and Candy also related an instance of homophobia they had to negotiate as black lesbians among black heterosexuals.

> Cindy (25, black, student, does not identify): Candy and I were at the Main Street [grocery store]–all the black people in there. They see us together all the time, OK? We were walking outside, and there were two bag boys and two cashiers in the parking lot, cause they were about to close. As we were walking into the store, they're like, "Look at those two dykes. They're dykes. Yeah, you fuckin' dykes." And I turned and looked, and I was like, "They cannot possibly be talking about us." And they were talking about us.
>
> Candy (22, black, student, does not identify): They were talking about us. (Youth group lines 676-83)

So even within communities where race is a common status, homophobia is still issue to which individuals may be held accountable. Lesbian self-presentations seem inescapable.

Sam, however, relates one instance in which she felt rewarded for her "out" appearance.

> Sam (23, student, others perceive her as butch): I was living in [names a small town in Florida] with my girlfriend at the time, and this is a little kind of college campus in Central Florida. Well, I was walking around campus, and my girlfriend and I took a LOT of grief for being open on campus. There were no other gay couples open on campus. And we were just getting it all over the place. It was really hard. Anyway, it was really nice this one time when this kid came up to us and said, "You know, I just want you to know that you are a champion for us all." (Youth group lines 741-51)

So, the production of overtly lesbian selves may garner rewards from other gays or lesbians. Perhaps this is the incentive to produce such out personhood. It is often understood as politically important to present one's sexual orientation openly, as many of my narrators discussed.

In sum, one may not be able to "negotiate" a sense of an agreeable personhood in the face of severe stigma. Instead, individuals must make choices about displays of statuses that they can hide to work around accountability for visual markers they may not be able to hide. Clearly, however, artful creation of self is always constrained by the

accountability by others to stigmatized statuses. Future theories of selves and symbolic interaction must take into account that interactions may not be consensual as Goffman presumes. Self theories need not ignore stigma to address the production of selves.

Sexual Maturity or Youthful Protest?–Explaining Sexual Stories

Ultimately, then, what explains the differences in reception to butch and femme among my two age groups of narrators? Differences over time are often difficult to determine. As my older narrators wish to explain, their understandings of sexual self are related to life course. My younger, Third Wave narrators wish to explain their behavior as active gender protest, a result of political generation. Rather, than take sides and definitely resolve this question, I would like to offer the possibility that both life course and political generation have an effect on selves. If we pay attention to both private and public selves, we may be able to make legitimate arguments for both sexual maturity and youthful protest. Below I consider both. I begin by outlining some potential life course explanations and then consider the possibilities of political generations.

Life Course

Why are butch and femme prevalent as a self story primarily among older lesbians? Perhaps, as my older narrators argue, this effect might be tied to a sense of developed private, sexual self. After all, "butches" and "femmes" tend to describe their interests as deeply personal, private selves; and most of my butch or femme-identified narrators spoke of developing that sense of self. Perhaps, identification with butch or femme is a result of sexual maturity. It is the articulation of one's interests after having myriad sexual experiences–which my younger narrators would likely not have had

simply, based on age. It would seem that, without language, experience is key to defining a sense of inner, private self. It follows that older women are likely to have had more sexual experiences. So, potentially the prevalence of butch and femme among older women suggests that younger women are naïve about their sexual selves. Why, then, were older women apparently less willing to wear their sexuality more openly, whereas many of my younger narrators appeared more butch or femme in public?

Perhaps, as private self, it is not necessary to wear one's sexuality in public, although much of the literature argues that public presentation is a means to advertise private self. It may be the case that other life course factors play into older women's less overt public presentations. Perhaps their life circumstances, as older women, do not permit it. That is, they are stuck in jobs in which they cannot be as out. They have more to lose, or are held more accountable to "professional" presentation on a daily basis. Younger women often have more flexibility while in school or in starter jobs, rather than careers.

Perhaps the older women are tired of fighting against sexism and homophobia, and they wish to live their lives comfortably and in peace. Surely, by virtue of age, older women would have suffered more stigma. Perhaps they just get tired of being so public– in the line of fire, as it were. Younger women may simply have more energy for protest, having not witnessed as much stigma in their lives.

Perhaps, younger women are more naïve about safety and sexism, having experienced less accountability for their female bodies. Youthfulness seems to bring a sense of infinite possibilities, often reflecting a kind of naivete about the accountability to which others will hold them. I was amazed at the extent of sexism in the workplace when

I first encountered it in my early 20s. It took a few years of reflection to recognize that many of my experiences throughout my life involved barriers placed by others that I was unwilling to admit existed until the "data" stacked up.

Perhaps the rejection of butch and femme is simply youth counterculture–a rejection of the generation before them. Maybe they simply have an interest in carving their own identities.

Many of these life course effects may explain some part of the private and public selves for women at different ages. But I worry about calling younger women naïve. While they may be somewhat less experienced, the notion of youthful naivete is too often used as an excuse not to listen to younger people. In my experiences of teaching undergraduate students, I often think to myself that they are so full of expectations and belief in themselves. They rarely seem aware of accountability and I, for one, am not eager to point it out too often. They often surprise me with their accomplishments. Maybe youthful excitement is necessary to create change in the heteronormative discourse.

Although life course effects are certainly applicable on an individual basis, the differences found between my younger and older narrators' responses to butch and femme are very much aligned with the politics of their times. In the following, I briefly address the relationship of Second Wave and Third Wave feminisms.

Political Generation - Feminisms' Second and Third Waves

The self speaks the politics of its times. Schneider (1988) notes among women the existence of generational cohorts based on their exposure to the politics of their times. Clearly, one's formation of self is related to the political times in which one comes of age. The narrative resources available to story a self and to negotiate a public person are dependent on the coherence of the day. For lesbians coming of age during the Second

Wave feminist era, the language of feminism was a language of oppression, patriarchy and lesbian separatism. It was an awakening to the existence of gender inequality. Lesbians of the Third Wave already benefited from this awakening, taking for granted the politics of gender equality but critiquing the rigidity of Second Wave politics (Findlen 2001; Heywood and Drake 1997; Walker 1995). Third Wave feminists have been exposed to the language of gender performance theory and the politics of contradiction. Each of the two age groups among my narrators describes the personhood of butch and femme through the languages that actively engage the politics of their cohorts.

Second Wave's Awakening

Second Wave feminism was an awakening to the oppressiveness of gender difference. A large literature describes the development of knowledge about gender oppression and patriarchy.[21] Much of this literature talks of individual men and men collectively oppressing women–patriarchy. It is a theory of groups in direct conflict. Rather than concentrate on the methods of producing subjectivities, it concentrates on people who oppress people. Specifically, lesbian or separatist feminism fought inequality by separating from men who were understood somewhat simplistically as the sole perpetrators of oppression. The selves of lesbians of this generation are still very much bound up in this form of feminist theory.

Arlene Stein (1997) discusses the development of lesbian identity in the post-lesbian feminist era. She relates tales from her narrators that, years after participation in 1970s lesbian feminist movements, many were appreciative of the transformative possibilities of lesbian feminism but also recognized the stifling rules of conduct

[21] For a very fine literature review, see Tong (1989).

understood in many lesbian feminist organizations. Krieger (1983) also reports of the merging of self and community during lesbian feminism's heyday. Stein writes that many of her narrators later had to be "Saved from the Seventies" to understand themselves in more individualistic ways. Stein argues that this "recovery" resulted in a huge participation in psychotherapy by lesbians in the 1980s. As a result of increased options for lesbians of the post-heyday generation, Stein hypothesized that lesbian identification might be less salient for younger women. What she found was just the opposite. She writes, "While the *salience* of lesbian identification among younger women did not seem significantly different from that of baby boomers at the same age, the *meaning* of this identification did (187, emphasis in original)." "Lesbian" is still a stigmatized category, but the options within it are much broader.

Feminism's Third Wave

My younger narrators still described lesbian identity as important and significant for them politically, but the possibilities within that identification seemed to be understood as many and varied. Much more consistent with Third Wave feminist ideals, my younger narrators concentrated, not so much on the oppression of one group by another, but on how the multiplicity of statuses and experiences of one individual creates a complex and often contradictory experience of self-production. As Pineros (unpublished)[22] has argued, if the Second Wave was a revolution against patriarchy, the Third Wave is a revolution within the self.

Heywood and Drake (1997) published an anthology of Third Wave feminist essays that point out the contradictory experiences of younger women who grew up being

[22] This idea is offered by Marcela Pineros in an unpublished paper with the working title "The Art of Being Third Wave: Coloring Outside the Lines."

told about feminism and taking gender equality as an assumption, while still experiencing not only gender inequality but the subtleties of interactions of many forms of difference. They describe the experiences of women of this generation as:

> …young feminists who grew up with equity feminism, got gender feminism in college, along with poststructuralism, and are now hard at work on a feminism that strategically combines elements of these feminisms, along with black feminism, women-of-color feminism, working-class feminism, pro-sex feminism, and so on. A Third Wave goal that comes directly out of learning from these histories and working among these traditions is the development of modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of a coalition politics based on these understandings–understandings that acknowledge the existence of oppression, even though it is not fashionable to say so. (3)

The politics of Third Wave Feminism attempts to take seriously the critiques of Second Wave Feminism as reducing "women" to a universal group and making invisible the varieties of experiences of all women. It both relies on the simplistic view of inequality as a group oppressing another and moves beyond it to theorizing gendered interaction and the processes of materializing gendered behavior (Bartky 1990; Butler 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). Third Wave owes a debt of gratitude to Second Wave while describing the politics of more complex gender theory and the experiences of women who grew up already hearing Second Wave critiques of the world.

Indeed, we should expect the development of younger lesbian selves to be particularly bound up in Third Wave politics as so much of Third Wave criticism deals with sexuality and the notion of women's pleasure. Heywood and Drake write, "Third Wave feminists often take cultural production and sexual politics as key sites of struggle, seeking to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice (4)." Third Wave, then, might be understood as the logical child of radical lesbian self-production.

The use of heteronormativity to undo heteronormativity is characteristic of this form of politics. For as Heywood and Drake write, "This is a contradiction that feminism's Third Wave has to face: an often conscious knowledge of the ways in which we are compelled and constructed by the very things that undermine us (11)."

My narrators exemplify Third Wave feminist ideals in their use of performative appearances while rejecting a sense of gendered inner self. The tactic may be politically effective for gender disruption, but some Second Wavers see it as problematic in that conceptualizing fluidity refuses to recognize the ongoing ways in which refusing to name a specificity may result in invisibility by others. For many older lesbians, the existence of homophobia still warrants a need for public displays of the identity politics of "realness."

> Eli (33, odd jobs, butch dyke): Okay. Well, I've had this conversation before of, "Well, I don't want to say that I'm even, like a dyke or a lesbian, because you know, I don't people to label me." And I'm always like, "Well, okay, but I think it's really important to be out because, uh, [pause] . . . role models and stuff like that, I mean." Personally, I love to see gay people in films and, uh, have people to be my heroes and be able to see somebody else and say, "That person's like me." And, you know, if we're not out, then we're in the closet, and then we're hiding who we are. And I just don't want to have to hide it. I mean, I don't want to have to say that I'm gay all the time, but at the same time, I don't want to have to pretend like I have a boyfriend, or that shit. . . (Eli individual interview lines 1056-65)

In this way, Second Wave and Third Wave ideologies compete over the best politics of self-presentation. On the one hand, argue the Third Wavers, lesbians should be allowed to be whomever they choose: "The person you see need not be the person I feel I am." On the other, argue the Second Wavers, "lesbian" is still a contested category to which individuals will have to answer when held accountable by others. Outer appearance is pertinent to selfhood in a world that continues to stigmatize lesbianism. Yet, my younger narrators present public selves that often get construed as butch or

femme, and regularly suffer homophobic reactions of others based on appearance, as I discussed earlier. Why, then, do younger narrators reject a sense of private butch or femme self?

My older narrators wanted to make a case for life course explanations. They argue that they developed their sexual selves. They became the private persons that seemed to fit them. Is it necessarily the case that the younger narrators simply do not yet know enough about sexuality? I think not. If the language of public self has changed over political generations, then it is likely that interpretations of private selves have also changed. Perhaps the language of penetration is not so salient for younger generations. Some of my younger narrators explained that they can conceptualize the power of sexuality in ways that are not just active or passive but in ways that fall outside the heteronormative paradigm. At times "receptive" can be understood as powerful. Sam explains:

> Sam (23, student, perceived as butch/butch couple by others): Physicality and gender and sexuality absolutely come together for me. I suppose you could call me masculine. But it's very difficult for me to experience if somebody is quote-unquote "topping" me, then it's difficult for me to experience it as being feminine. *I* feel power. (Sam and Jo couple interview lines 1265-68)

Here Sam rejects the language of receptive as passive. In the language of the 1990s political era, power is in the sexual expression. Much more aligned with Third Wave ideals, the creative expression of sexuality is powerful. A language of sexual oppression cannot encompass Sam's experiences. Only the language of ambiguity and creativity and contradiction allows for private interpretations that create new meanings of sexual experiences. As I discussed in Chapter 5, the feminist editing of butch and femme

more recently is also moving in that direction. Perhaps the negotiation of sexual personhood is beginning to move beyond the constraints of heteronormativity.

In expounding the virtues of Third Wave feminism, I think it is important to give credit where credit is due. If younger women do not feel as compelled to use the language of penetration to create a sense of sexual self, then Second Wave feminism has to some degree been successful in awakening feminist politics to the omnipresence of heteronormativity. If the language is beginning to expand, then the 1970s/80s feminist critiques paved the way for separating "sex" from heterosex to some degree. The younger generation was born in a generation that took equality seriously. They benefit by standing on the shoulders of the older women. If their youthful protest is able to separate private self from public self, which I doubt they do as fully as they charge, then they live in a reality that has profited by the wisdom of the Second Wave.

A Final Word on Butch and Femme over Time

As I argued in an earlier publication (Crawley 2001), butch and femme have tended to emerge when feminist movements are in abeyance. Historically most prevalent in the post-First Wave mid-century and the post-Second Wave late 1980s/early 1990s, butch and femme seem to have been utilized as lesbian social protest that is written on the body. How then should we predict the future politics of the Third Wave? If younger lesbians are wearing the "look" of butch and femme but rejecting the private self, how do we interpret the state of feminist advancement?

In arguing that feminist movements continue to make advances, Whittier (1995) asserts that the supposed "postfeminist" period of the 1980s was not characterized by

feminist abeyance as the 1950s had been. Even while experiencing a backlash (Faludi 1991), gender equity ideals became entrenched in social consciousness; and some legitimacy was afforded to, for example, many Women's Studies departments. Many feminist organizations were already institutionalized in that period. Whittier writes, "The notion of social movement transitions suggests that even movements in abeyance are not simply static, waiting in a sort of suspended animation to be revitalized (257)." When lacking activated organizations, individuals can protest on their bodies.

Whereas 1970s "androgynous" lesbian feminists attempted with little success to find a position that is ungendered, they failed to completely undo gender, because sex cannot be unmarked. An androgynous woman is still understood to be "woman." This suggests the importance of awareness of accountability by others. Younger lesbians are wearing recognizable genders (Butler 1993, Case 1989), but refusing to recognize them as private self. They demonstrate they can do gender "wrong" while refusing to give accountability for gender any legitimacy. They demonstrate the contradictions of the Third Wave. Regardless of the self we construct for ourselves, we know we are still accountable to others. Some gains of feminism have been made for the private self in ways that public accountability for female bodies have not. To assert a truly radical feminist ideal, we must work to move beyond notions of male bodily competence/female bodily incompetence. Until we disconnect female bodies from accountability to incompetence, female-bodied people will never be able to negotiate truly agentic, creative public selves.

CHAPTER 7
THE RELEVANCE OF BUTCH AND FEMME AS NARRATIVE SELVES: WHAT LESBIANS CAN TEACH SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

Many of the issues regarding butch and femme that I raise in this project ring familiar. I am not the first to discuss butch and femme as performative or as illustrative of a sense of "real," core feelings about sexuality or as situational and contextual based on political generation, race, or class. As the literature review in Chapter 1 suggests, many authors have entered these debates. Indeed, I rely on much of that work to construct my argument. Nonetheless, I hope to have moved beyond explanations of what butch and femme are to concentrate on how they are produced through interaction. Butch and femme are not just natural things that blossom from some core origin, sure to grow like plants if fed and watered carefully. They are interactionally-produced stories we tell about ourselves to explain to others the specificity of who we feel we are. Simultaneously, others hold us accountable to those stories, helping us shape them as interactional processes.

In stating this, I do not mean to suggest that people do not have urges. Perhaps there is some genetic code that suggests a talent for piano or an affinity for sailing or an urge to make vaginas happy. The existence of the urge is not my concern. I am much more interested in the social circumstance that compels us to answer to some urges as opposed to others. Why am I held so accountable, *by others*, for my sexual interests in women and not my unnatural urge to waterski or my unexplainable distaste for cooked green vegetables? My concern is to explain the social processes by which sexual choices

are limited and the innovative ways that stigmatized communities learn to speak a coherent, non-normative self that intends itself to be understood as legitimate and "real."

Let me also be clear that this project is not so much about lesbians as it is about heteronormativity as a going concern. It is about the limited discourses through which we are all asked to interpret our experiences as sexed and sexual people, and the creative ways that those of us who live outside the norm narrate a self that is both coherent and comfortable enough to make sense of our lives. Talking with lesbians–people who live outside the norm–is especially useful in illuminating how heteronormativity works. If gender is to humans as water is to fish, as Lorber writes (1994), then we must analyze gender from some angle that makes it less transparent. Looking through the lives of those who are unsettled by their non-normative positions relative to heteronormativity provides a much better perspective to make clear the constraints placed on us all by heteronormative discourses and practices. Sociologists could learn quite a lot by talking to lesbians. This is why butch and femme as phenomena are so fascinating to me and so relevant to all those interested in gender and sexualities studies. Butch and femme are a microcosm of gendered and sexualized interactions produced by our culture. Hence, it is important to understand how butch and femme are products of interaction.

Butch and femme are produced through the process of making sense of nonconformity in a heteronormative world. This is an interactional and interpretive process narrated as reality. Butch and femme derive from the limited and limiting discourses available for storying women's sexuality coherently, yet they are actively produced as resistant to those discourses and specific to lesbians. Ultimately, this project is a testament to the importance of narrating self (which includes responding to the ideas

and actions of others) as a means for individuals to actively participate in the production of making sense of the world.

The Analytic Importance of the Self

The notion of an empirical self is important because empirical study of the self is still a useful tool for knowledge production. Conceptualizing the social world as only one that exists unanchored in representation, or subjectively in each individual consciousness does not describe the ways in which the social world acts upon individuals in material ways to affect life outcomes. Marxist theory, many feminist theories and, in some sense, queer theory all speak to the importance of understanding the oppressive character of the social world. Sexism, racism and homophobia exist–they are observable. The question remains as to how they exist and are reproduced. I suggest it is appropriate to study observable systems of oppression by asking members of the oppressed groups about their understandings of their oppression. As Blumer notes, the social world continues to "talk back" to science–assuring us of both its existence as produced through talk and the importance of understanding the realities of members. The self is the tool through which reality is accomplished and practiced and, thus, an appropriate analytic for studying the dynamics of inequalities.

The self exists for members as a "real" thing that must be empirically understood by researchers in social psychology or, as I prefer to call it, sociology of the self. Whether conceived as a "real" thing or simply an analytical tool for description, the self broadly conceived assists in describing both the agentic abilities of individuals and the

institutional nature of social groups that comprise social experience. Postmodern notions of representations that are unanchored to selves do not provide that opportunity.

Orienting to the interpretive practice (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2000) of individuals in the process of making sense of self illuminates how discourses are put into material situations with material consequences. Following its pragmatist tradition, interpretive practice provides for us a potential way to understand lived experience that is both agentically created and institutionally constrained. Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) perspective sets up the possibility of conceiving of the self as analytically real, if not physically existent. In the Blumerian tradition of the self as an abstract object, the self is itself a narrative resource. As an abstract object, it gives each of us the opportunity to tell our own stories–to agentically narrate ourselves. For all practical purposes, the self is real because we believe it to be real. Thomas and Thomas' (1928) axiom fits perfectly here: "Situations defined as real are real in their consequences." And, as Goffman illustrates and Foucault (1977 and 1978) takes to the nth degree, the stories from which we borrow to construct notions of subjectivity in institutional settings are very real in their consequences–a realness with material consequences. In my estimation, Holstein and Gubrium provide a way of understanding social interaction such that the actor is given credit for her humanity while still recognizing the systems of oppression that often do impede full transcendental subjectivity. It is at the intersections of self that we find how discourses become reality through human interaction.

A Final Word on Findings and Future Directions

Although there is much left to learned by studying the selves of lesbians, the results of this project suggest at least three important things. First, the coherences to which others hold us accountable are often at least as salient in the production of self and personhood as are our own ideas of ourselves. The presumption of race and sex as biological phenotypes continues to dictate many life experiences for people presumed to have non-white or non-male bodies. The realities imposed by others in everyday interaction often preempt any opportunity for individuality in practice. As an African American friend of mine is fond of saying, "All you have to do is be black and die."[23] Something similar could be said for women. Regardless of all other accomplishments and circumstances, you will still be seen as only "a girl." The reality of this material world is produced in the way we make sense of our lived experiences through talk. It is an accomplished reality.

Ethnomethodological approaches are well suited for analyzing the production of realities in everyday interaction. They add to performance theories the link between available subjectivities and the individual means to produce such persons based on negotiations with others. Performance theory theorizes subjectivity. Ethnomethodology demonstrates the negotiated production of persons. The combination of the two is a powerful tool for social analysis of inequalities.

Second, the heteronormative paradigm remains the only coherence system for understanding sexuality and gender in our everyday lives. Ultimately, the persistence of butch and femme stems from the ability of individuals to narrate coherent personhood in

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[23] Many thanks go to Carla Edwards for exposing me to the realities of everyday black life–a world of which I have too long been unaware as a result of my own race privilege.

this heteronormative system. I continue to be amazed at the ways in which women edit this coherence to attempt change for themselves and future generations. Although the heteronormative system is continually being nibbled away by feminist editing, it remains a forceful system of coherence that we cannot ignore. Only through changing this discourse–providing more possibilities and perverting the existing ones–can we expect greater ability to narrate creative and egalitarian realities.

The challenge, then, is to consider oppression not just as what some individuals do to others but as systems of discourses operating at a variety of levels–national media, local communities, intimate interactions, individual self constructions among others–that encourage actors to act. Discourses and practices are inseparable. Hence, social scientists must rely on analyses that encompass both texts and acts to understand how groups remain oppressed.

Third, the voices of individuals in their everyday lives illuminate the advancements of feminist politics and an understanding of the meaning of time. In my estimation, the realities produced by my narrators demonstrate the many gains of Second Wave feminist principles and the promise of Third Wave politics. The fight has expanded. Not only are law and politics the purview of feminist criticism, but the self and all its tangled web of experiences and statuses is also under scrutiny. I am delighted that younger women now expect equal treatment, although they often do not receive it. Their reality is a greater sense of entitlement than women of older generations were afforded. But I am concerned that notions of time become so muddled across generations. Many younger women do not seem to have a strong grasp of institutional critiques of Second Wave feminism, often reducing those ideas as outdated when the reality they were

intended to produce has surely not yet been realized. Conversely, women of the Second Wave generation seem less well informed of Third Wave critiques of the Second Wave's concentration on outside forces to the detriment of self-analysis. Lamenting the supposed "post-feminist" attitudes of Third Wavers by Second Wavers seems as overgeneralized as the simplistic reduction by Third Wavers of Second Wave separatism as "angry, bra burning." Neither generation seems well schooled about the politics of the other. We need to read widely and work hard to get the "story" about time straight. An accurate sense of feminist history is key to this process. Third Wavers still have much to learn from Second Wave theories. Similarly, Second Wavers have much to learn from the increasing complexity of Third Wave analyses.

Nonetheless, I am optimistic. My narrators, younger and older, continue to keep equality in the forefront of their realities. The creativity with which they actively produce their own understandings of selves and the perseverance they demonstrate in seeking a self they *like for themselves* gives me hope that the feminist goal–the narration of an egalitarian female-bodied personhood–is eminently possible.

To close then, the study of the production of reality in interaction is critically important to understanding inequalities. Theorizing the interactive process of developing self is key to understanding how inequality is produced on a large scale. Exposing the impact of others' receptions to us in our own self-production, and critiquing the discourses that underlie the production of reality are necessary to understanding oppression. Oppression is a reality but it is a social reality. It exists through interaction, and only through interaction can it be undone.

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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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